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Fiction Networks: The Emergence of Proprietary, Persistent, Large-Scale Popular Fictions

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Fiction Networks: The Emergence of Proprietary, Persistent, Large-Scale Popular Fictions

by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

December, 2004

Dedication

For my family

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my dissertation supervisors, Dr. Adam Zachary Newton and Dr. John Slatin; to Dr. Margaret Syverson, who has supported this work from its earliest stages; and, to Dr. Brian Bremen, Dr. David Phillips, and Dr. Clay Spinuzzi, all of whom have actively engaged with this dissertation in progress, and have given me immensely helpful feedback.

This dissertation has benefited from the attention and feedback of many generous readers, including David Barndollar, Victoria Davis, Aimee Kendall, Eric Lupfer, and Doug Norman. Thanks also to Ben Armintor, Kari Banta, Sarah Paetsch, Michael Smith, Kevin Thomas, Matthew Tucker and many others for productive conversations about branding and marketing, comics universes, popular entertainment, and persistent world gaming.

Some of my most useful, and most entertaining, discussions about the subject matter in this dissertation have been with my brother, Adam Craft. I also want to thank my parents, Donna Cox and John Craft, and my partner, Michael Craigue, for their help and support.

This dissertation was written, in part, with the help of teaching support from the Division of Rhetoric and Composition and the Computer Writing and Research Lab at the University of Texas at Austin, and was completed with fellowship support from the Digital Media Collaboratory, an initiative of the IC^2 Institute at the University of Texas at Austin.

Fiction Networks: The Emergence of Proprietary, Persistent, Large-Scale Popular Fictions

Publication No._____

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2004

Supervisors: Adam Z. Newton, John M. Slatin

Under multiple pressures in contemporary media – consolidated corporate oversight, facilitated audience response and re-creation, coordinated longevity of fictions, expansion of popular artifacts into new markets – many popular fictions take on aggregate forms, and present fictional worlds that are composed of the large-scale conglomeration of disparate texts. These aggregate forms, or "fiction networks," span very different types of medium and activity, but share key characteristics: they must negotiate the dynamics of an ongoing story with the relative stasis of branding in a market; they must maintain coherence within a system of production that accommodates many different creators; and, they must sustain a fiction that is not designed to conclude. In these fictions, one can trace the effects of contextual pressures in various textual or simulative phenomena, sometimes on the level of the individual artifact, sometimes on the level of the aggregate form, and sometimes on both levels.

This work explores how proprietary, persistent, large-scale, and intertextual popular fictions have evolved and are evolving, using as guideposts some specific forms

– "comics universes" and persistent world games – where these pressures are particularly visible and relevant. The first chapter introduces the "fiction network" as a concept and discusses the forms and phenomena at play in a network's creation and maintenance. Chapter 2 establishes a more detailed analytical framework for these aggregate fictions, using theories of fictional worlds and Bakhtin's work on genre and the chronotope. Chapter 3 discusses the comics universe as an aggregate form and analyzes key points in the evolution of the universe maintained by DC Comics, Inc. The fourth chapter looks at persistent world games as "fiction networks" and analyzes the game *Star Wars Galaxies*, both as a popular fiction in its own right and as a component of a larger multiple-media fiction. Finally, the conclusion attempts to reconcile the proprietary ontology of these popular fictions with other, non-proprietary models of production, such as Open Source; it also discusses the issues "fiction networks" present to conventional concepts of aesthetics.

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Chapter 1: Fiction Networks

This work grows from a belief that, in our contemporary Western ecology of popular fiction and entertainment, there are specific literary phenomena that require description and analysis beyond what past scholarship has given them: indeed, a belief that these phenomena occupy spaces that existing schools of scholarship and theory, given their parameters, cannot fully bring to account. These phenomena are strongly characterized by *use*, specifically within use operations described as "reception," "poaching," and "play," and they are explicitly aligned with capitalist systems of media and entertainment. They are, therefore, productively described by work within cultural studies, an approach which entrenches itself in the operations of use and the negotiations between producers and consumers, and situates those negotiations as productively complex.

> As Tony Bennett points out, the impact of the work of Antonio Gramsci on British cultural studies has meant that popular culture is more often theorized as a field of struggle rather than any particular set of texts or practices. More specifically, popular culture comes to be defined as the site where a dominated culture and a subordinated culture collide. (Daly 5)

However, the phenomena in question here, as "fields of struggle," cannot escape the particularities of their textuality or practices, largely because, for reasons I will present in the following pages, these are phenomena where the fields of struggle *are*, literally, the sets of texts and practices being analyzed. The forms in question all blur the boundaries among production, reception, and textuality itself, and in doing so complicate our understanding of use in a fundamental way. In this work, then, I keep "texts and practices" closely in focus, partially because these forms are novel in that their textual and narrative operations are inseparably intertwined with the cultural negotiations that surround them: to speak of one is, in many ways, to speak of the other. At the same time,

I argue that the texts at play not only act as points of cultural negotiation but also influence how those negotiations happen; in their formal operations they not only realize cultural negotiations and contexts, but meaningfully complicate them, and we must consequently rely on frameworks supplementary to cultural theory to describe their characteristics and operations.

And so, this work also makes use of approaches within narrative theory, particularly semiotics: approaches that attempt to understand the operations and mechanics of various symbolic forms. While I have used the rather vague signifier "phenomena" thus far, the popular forms invoked within this analysis include comics, film, prose, and games, all of which make or enable the generation of symbolic meaning in significantly different ways, and therefore will by necessity behave very differently as textual points of negotiation among different subcultures. I employ film theory, semiotic studies of comics, and the growing field of work in the area of "ludology" or video game studies to describe how, even in a heterogeneous media landscape, different forms behave in their own ways, and make acts of adaptation and translation complex undertakings. It is my hope that I can strike a balance between the specificity of symbolic systems of meaning and the systems of production and response that inform all the systems at play, and that I can avoid being too totalizing on either front.

Finally, this analysis makes liberal use of the scholarship of Thomas Pavel, and of Mikhail Bakhtin and his "school" of genre theorists (which includes Tzvetan Todorov); these critics, I believe, have perspectives which place them somewhat outside conventional descriptions of both semiotics and cultural theory. I give these theorists particular weight in this analysis, as they have particular affinities with arguments I am attempting to make. In Pavel's case, I am beholden to his thesis that the "fictional world" which is the referent of a text or texts has a coherence that is, to some degree,

independent from its manifestation in signs. My debt to Bakhtin is more difficult to encapsulate in brief, and is detailed in Chapter 2, but as a theorist of "form-shaping ideologies" and traditions embodied in artifacts, I believe Bakhtin has a particular utility to this work as a scholar concerned with both the mechanisms of narrative and the historical and cultural moments that inform those mechanisms. Pavel's argument attempts to describe a space of fiction, of engagement with an imaginary, that, while tied to form and to historical moments, exceeds both form and the material practices of production and reception; Bakhtin, on the other hand, is fully engaged with both narrative operations and with the historical perspectives that inform them. Together, I believe, they serve a particular utility toward outlining traditions of fiction-making that, even as they are deeply informed by cultural and material practices, paradoxically attempt to construct, and enable a phenomenological transport to, coherent universes of imaginary engagement – an impetus which, I believe, explains their frequent characterization as "escapism."

I use the term *utility* very consciously here: while I am certainly interested in this work as a statement within critical debates in literary and media studies, I hope it has as much, if not more, potential as a document that illuminates – and gives a conceptual vocabulary for – contexts, parameters, and constraints that inform a growing number of artifacts within our popular media. In this sense, I believe this work is increasingly relevant to those who produce, market, consume, and make use of these artifacts, and it is my hope that it is a first step toward pragmatic frameworks that generate and maintain more aesthetically compelling, and possibly more democratic, popular fictions. In service of this goal, I believe it is perhaps more useful to present a functional, if heterogeneous, conglomeration of theories and perspectives than to attempt to propose the dominance of any one school of literary theory: fidelity to a specific theoretical

approach, while perhaps methodologically cleaner, does a potential disservice to future pragmatic approaches, especially given that, again, these forms are either unaccounted – or situated as "limit cases" – by the individual schools at play here.

In the end, this omission or marginalization is perhaps appropriate; as I will argue later, the history of these forms is a history of informational scale and complexity exceeding systems and approaches intended to manage both, and there is a pleasing parallelism, but also an honest appraisal, in arguing the inadequacy of existing systemic or "top-down" approaches to describe what these forms are, and what they do. The popular fictions I will discuss are large and complicated structures; their managers attempt to subordinate their scale and complexity within "meta-stories" of linearity and unity, but do so only with partial success. This inability to resolve complexity points towards *prosaics* as detailed by Bakhtin scholars Morson and Emerson:

> Prosaics is suspicious of systems in the strong sense, in the sense used by structuralists, semioticians, and general systems theorists: an organization in which every element has a place in a rigorous hierarchy… If one thinks prosaically, one doubts that any aspect of culture, from the self to a language, from daily life to all of history, could be organized tightly enough to exhibit an all-encompassing pattern. (Morson and Emerson 27-28).

Morson and Emerson go on to cite Gregory Bateson and state that "order needs justification, disorder does not. The natural state of things is *mess*" (Morson and Emerson 29-30). The fictions I will explore in the following pages are loci of emergent complexity, unpredictable behaviors, heterogeneity, and mess; we will see that any systemic understanding of them is contingent, and continually subject to revision. It, then, seems counter to the spirit of these networks to take a homogeneous approach to them, to assume that one school of theory could organize them from above when the very practice of their creation and management is fundamentally doomed to fail with such an organizational approach. It is my hope that this analysis, in its own heterogeneity,

respects the prosaics of the phenomena it describes, and that it will, in its acknowledgement of its own contingency, serve best as a framework that allows us – producers, critics, consumers and poachers of what I call "fiction networks" – to move forward.

MEDIA INFRASTRUCTURES AND FICTION

On January 15, 2003, with its ruling on *Eldred v. Ashcroft*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act, which extended the time limit on copyright, in the case of individual copyright holders, to an author's life plus 70 years and, in the case of corporate copyright holders, to 95 years. One of the key proponents of copyright extension, the Walt Disney Company, lobbied for the Bono Act in the first place when its copyright control of "Steamboat Willie," Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck neared a 2003 lapse. When the 20-year extension Disney has been given begins to draw to a close, it will doubtlessly lobby for a further extension: copyright ownership periods have been extended 11 times in the past 40 years.[1]

The Bono Act and the *Eldred v. Ashcroft* decision both reflect governmental support of a powerful corporate impetus. Since the 1970s, large media companies have followed a trajectory of conglomeration, which has resulted in the radical centralization and control of intellectual property on a global level by these companies. In *Copyrighting Culture,* Ronald Bettig cites existing "media monopoly" scholarship to state:

> … by the early 1990s, the bulk of media output in the United States was in the hands of only twenty major media corporations. In early 1989, before its merger with Warner Communications, Inc., J. Richard Munro, then chairman and chief executive of Time, Inc., predicted that by the mid-1990s "the media and

[1] Information for this paragraph was gathered from: ("The Coming of Copyright Perpetuity"; The Eric Eldred Act)

> entertainment industry will be composed of a limited number of global giants" and that Time intended to be one of those companies. These firms needed to be vertically integrated, large enough to produce, market, and distribute worldwide, and able to amortize the costs of doing global business through as broad a distribution network as possible. (Bettig 38)

This consolidation of media companies, as one might imagine, has a broad range of political, social and economic implications. It also, however, has structural implications for the stories these companies produce. Mass media companies create, among other products, popular fictions: stories that involve imaginary elements marketed under a corporate brand. Mass-media popular fictions reflect the market-oriented system and climate that generates and manages them:

> Herein lies the contradiction of capitalist media: to understand our mass media, we must be able to understand them as always and simultaneously text and commodity, intertext and product line. This contradiction is well captured in the phrase "show business." (Meehan 61-62)

The Bono Act thus reflects not only a growth of corporate control of intellectual property – an increase in the ability of media companies to manage, persist, and develop content-as-commodity over time – but also what one might consider a consequent structural evolution, in a corporate context, of key intellectual properties, or fictions, themselves. The longevity of copyrights retained by the Walt Disney Company both reflects and reinforces a corresponding longevity in their characters – Mickey, Minnie, Donald, and the rest – as active creative products. Disney has an interest not only in retaining existing rights to old stories featuring their classic characters, but in retaining the right to produce countless new stories. Mickey and Donald are characters (agents in a fiction) and brands (agents in a market) at once, and the longevity and expansion of Disney as a global company has a direct impact on the longevity and expansion of the fictions they sell.

While, in the case of Disney, this propagation is more one of visual iconographies than stories – Mickey, when he appears within the context of a story at all, appears in

simple, self-contained and episodic ones – media companies are also producing, marketing and distributing continuing fictions on a global scale, and are doing so as broadly as possible. Thanks to the efforts of the companies who promote them, our most popular "global stories" are familiar in markets worldwide: *Star Wars*, *Batman, Star Trek, X-Men, The Matrix*. Media companies maintain and reiterate story threads from these properties in numerous media, for a wide array of audiences, in what Henry Jenkins has termed "commercial intertexts":

> These new horizontally-integrated corporations (such as Viacom or Warner Brothers Communications Inc.) make production decisions on the basis of "synergies." That is, they seek content that can move fluidly across various media. Initially, this practice meant the ability to construct ancillary markets for a successful film or television program. Increasingly, however, it becomes difficult to determine which markets are ancillary and which are core to the success of a media narrative. Marsha Kinder has proposed the term, "entertainment supersystem," to refer to the series of intertextual references and promotions spawned by any successful product. The industry increasingly refers to *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* as "franchises," using a term that makes clear the commercial stakes in these transactions. This new "franchise" system actively encourages viewers to pursue their interests in media content across various transmission channels, to be alert to the potential for new experiences offered by film, television, comic books, computer games, websites, paperback novels, and other related materials. Increasingly, success in one media leads to success in a number of different media. The concept of technological convergence follows directly from this economic logic. Technological convergence is attractive to the media industries because it will open multiple entry points into the consumption process and at the same time, enable consumers to more quickly locate new manifestations of a popular narrative. (Jenkins, The Poachers and the Stormtroopers: Cultural Convergence in the Digital Age)

These phenomena not only open a popular narrative to new markets and channels; they inform the ongoing shape and development of the popular narrative itself. As these popular stories have grown, dispersed, and, in many cases, pushed the limits of their copyright terms, they have seen consequent changes not only in their distribution and reception, but also in their composition, and not necessarily in the ways that readers

might expect. "Technological convergence" is a transformative impetus for popular storytelling; it has informative – or deformative – effects not only on how a story is told but what it tells.

At the same time that economies of media have become more centralized and oligarchic, technologies of media production, distribution and reception have become more dispersed and, arguably, democratic.[2] Internet technologies – the Web, peer-to-peer file sharing, USENET, networked gaming – have provided media consumers with the ability to not only publicly consume but communally respond to popular fictions, and, often, to shape, rewrite, or extend them. Though the Internet contains concentrated nodes (of traffic, rhetoric, and culture), the operating principles of the Internet oppose centralization; the Internet is, by structure, distributed and decentralized. In addition, technologies of media production have become popularly accessible: a home computer user can, with a small amount of effort and expenditure, purchase tools to edit film, manipulate graphics, or enter a communal space of online game creation. These structures and technologies make it easy for readers or audience members to access and manipulate intellectual property, from written texts to video files, and, if they so choose, to republish and redistribute the artifacts of their acts of bricolage.

As one might expect, the trend toward centralization in popular media and the trend toward democratization in popular technologies coexist in constant tension. We see this tension made manifest in explicit, public debates and conflicts; its most present site of conflict is the ongoing conflict between the Recording Industry Association of

[2] I use *democratic* here with a small 'd', and with an awareness of its political implications: to say simply that the Internet is an agent of democracy oversimplifies the political and social structures which impact the Internet even as they are impacted by it. However, I stand by the claim that Internet technologies, particularly the Web, make the publication and distribution of intellectual property far easier, and easier for a far larger group of people, than previous popular technologies; for that reason, they have a democratizing influence on the exchange of intellectual property. For more on democracy and Internet technologies, see *Democracy and New Media* (2003) and Lawrence Lessig's *Code* (1999).

America (RIAA) and an American culture that has, in its embrace of file sharing, rejected the business models for music that the RIAA has long assumed to be inviolable. In years past, however, this tension has manifested itself elsewhere, specifically in legal disagreements over "official" and "unofficial" Web sites affiliated with a celebrity or popular fiction. When the equalizing force of the Web and the ready availability of authoring tools removed the advantages of production and distribution that corporate-generated creative products enjoyed by default, corporations found that Web content generated by fans and other independent parties could easily recombine and transform their copyrighted content, and could as a result be as popular as, or more popular than, their own. Similarly, DJ Danger Mouse's popular – and freely distributed – "mash" or compositional integration of the Beatles' *White Album* and Jay-Z's *Black Album* into *The Grey Album* garnered negative attention and threats from EMI, the owner of the Beatles' recordings as intellectual property, but nonetheless enjoyed widespread reception on the Web. In these cases, copyright and preexisting concepts of intellectual property ownership have come in conflict with – or have proven inadequate to circumscribe – the changed understandings of textual production, reproduction and distribution that popular technologies have wrought.

These changes impact reception as a practice and as a topic of study; Henry Jenkins, a scholar of comparative media and cultural reception whose book *Textual Poachers* is an authoritative ethnography of the practices and responses of popular fiction fandom, acknowledges the new questions and realities presented by this changed playing field:

> For some time, research into fandom has been criticized for not adequately exploring issues of political economy, often with the implication that if we looked at issues of media ownership and production, we would see that fandom was simply an outgrowth of the marketing process and therefore not at all resistant to corporate control of culture. As we examine the political economy of fandom,

> nothing so simple emerges: fans are sometimes desired consumers for cultural products and certain marketing strategies do seem to court fannish responses. As I will suggest, many fan practices have been pulled towards the mainstream in the decade since I wrote *Textual Poachers*, leaving the book's emphasis on fandom's marginalization a quaint record of a past era. At the same time, these same corporations adopt strategies of responding to fan culture (especially on the web and the net) that strip consumers of any rights to participate within their own culture; threatening letters and phone calls are often radicalizing for fans who simply wanted to express their affiliations with a particular cultural product. The problem lies in our polarized vocabulary of co-optation and resistance; neither term adequately describes the unstable and often mercurial relations between media corporations and fan culture, which are sometimes welcoming and sometimes hostile. (Jenkins, The Poachers and the Stormtroopers: Cultural Convergence in the Digital Age)

I would argue that these "unstable and mercurial" relations are destabilized even further than Jenkins posits. "Co-optation and resistance" is a polarized binary that elides ambiguities of relation in this system, but "media corporations and fan culture" can potentially also be read as a polarization that can be complicated, at least as far as the concepts apply to roles of production and reception. Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, cited by Jenkins as a key influence on *Textual Poachers*, describes the operations of consumption and use as invisible "poaching," both powerful and invisible:

> The "making" in question is a production, a *poiesis* – but a hidden one, because it is scattered over areas defined and occupied by systems of "production" (television, urban development, commerce, etc.), and because the steadily increasing expansion of these systems no longer leaves "consumers" any *place* in which they can indicate what they *make* or *do* with the products of those systems. To a rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds *another* production, called "consumption." The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order. (de Certeau xii-xiii)

Both *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) and *Textual Poachers* (1992) are analyses born within an ecology of mass media that predates the popular adoption of the Internet

as a media technology. Even as the new practices of verbal, visual and kinesthetic interaction enabled by the Web and online games prove the validity of de Certeau's and Jenkins' positions on use and the productive aspects of reception, they also complicate and amplify them by making the boundaries between production (the realm of the media corporation) and reception (the realm of fan culture) more contingent and less absolute. Even as new technologies and appropriations of fan practices complicate our understanding of a fan's reception of a text, these same technologies, and the increasing cultural longevity of these popular fiction systems, complicate our understanding of a fan's very position in relation to a text. From the productive power granted players of online games by the practices of "user-generated content" to the hiring of fans to work on "official" artifacts from the fictions they follow, social, technological, and market forces increase the possibility that a creator of or within a corporate-owned fiction is her- or himself likewise a member of that fiction's fan culture, or vice versa. This directly impacts, again, not only the transmission and reception of popular texts, but the texts themselves.

Under these multiple pressures – consolidated corporate oversight, facilitated audience response and re-creation, coordinated longevity of fictions, expansion of popular artifacts into new markets – popular fictions have developed new scales, characteristics, and boundaries. This work will explore how popular texts have evolved and are evolving in the wake of these economic, technological, and cultural developments, using as guideposts some specific forms – "comics universes" and persistent world games – where these pressures are particularly visible and relevant. It will suggest new terms, metaphors, and practices for understanding these transformed popular fictions, which are examples of what I call *fiction networks*.

WHAT IS A FICTION NETWORK?

The fiction network is an aggregate form, what one might call a macro-form. It is a fictional text – a representation of a fictional space – that is composed of the large-scale conglomeration of other texts. These networks are: *proprietary* – held as intellectual property by an owning body, and produced under the distinct context of modern capitalist media, rather than by a "folk culture" or a solitary author; *persistent* – maintained over time without a designated point of closure, and temporally outside the limits of any given artifact; *expansive* – constituted of a large number of artifacts, to a point where scale itself is a formative pressure; and, *connected* – constituted by intertextual relationships between artifacts, which in sum constitute a fictional world. In these networks, one can trace the effects of these pressures in various textual or simulative phenomena, sometimes on the level of the individual artifact, sometimes on the level of the aggregate form, and sometimes on both levels. That is, the formative pressures that form a fiction network indicate themselves on the level of text or macro-text.

To connect these into a coherent definition, "fiction networking" is shorthand for *the commercial generation and maintenance of a persistent, large-scale intertext for the purpose of both expanding and deepening consumer engagement*. The term should be understood as describing a context that results in textual behaviors, but not necessarily a marker of *formal* similarity. In other words, fiction networks arise from a similar media ecology, and share characteristics and consequent behaviors, but they have very different compositions and formal operations.

This definition attempts to explore connections in popular fictions among textual structures, textual meanings, and the material and cultural apparatus (contexts of production and reception, economic contexts, and technologies) that inform both. Cultural theorists Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott originally argued in *Bond and*

Beyond that analysis of popular icons and fictions increasingly seems to require something other than an approach that "focuses exclusively on the formal properties of texts at the expense of the various social and ideological relations of reading through which the consumption of those texts is organized" (Bennett and Woollacott 6). Instead, they posit, one must take into account both the intertext generated by the relationships between texts that constitute a popular fiction – "[popular heroes] exist as signifiers produced in the circulations and exchanges between those texts which together contribute to the expanded reproduction of the figure of the hero" – and the "shifting cultural and ideological currency of the figure of the popular hero which floats between and connects such texts into related sets" (Bennett and Woollacott 6).

"Fiction network" is, obviously, something of an intertextual perspective. However, I hope to focus here not only on the relations among texts but on the ongoing practices that generate popular fictions, the ways in which those practices form those fictions as intertexts over time, and the ways in which the component forms and artifacts which compose the network signify these practices in ways that are particular to their formal parameters. As Bennett and Woollacott state, there are "distinct differences between the formal techniques of writing and film-making and the associated processes by which ideologies are worked into fictions" (Bennett and Woollacott 8) – not to mention the formal techniques and associated processes of comics production and of game design and development, which I bring to analysis here. In the face of this, it seems key to emphasize that, in this work, I am talking not simply about an all-encompassing master form of the "fiction network," but about three distinct sorts of large-scale fictions for which "fiction network" is a productive rubric, each of which share characteristics but also differ in terms of their formal practices. In addition, I wish to make a claim that complicates not just a concept of form at play in these networks, but the concepts of

reception and social relations as they correspond to these forms. The different forms at play here arise from different material, cultural, and social contexts, and they encourage different forms of participation and different literacies. In that spirit, I would like to spend some time discussing the distinct textual and intertextual forms mobilized in this analysis before returning to my analysis of the phenomena at play in all of them.

FORMS AT PLAY

The first of these large-scale fictions has had many names: as mentioned before, Marsha Kinder has termed it the "entertainment superstructure," while Henry Jenkins calls it the "commercial intertext." A common related term is "mass-media franchise," but that term, though inclusive, is too broad to describe the form I refer to here, and the phrase "mass-media" too general to signify the gradations of audience that are active in such a network. Though I hesitate to create more terminology, it may be best to describe this as a *multiple-media universe*, because it reflects the vernacular used to discuss these entities (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s "Buffyverse," *Star Wars'* "Expanded Universe"), and because it is evocative of the theories of fictional worlds I use to describe it. The second and third forms, the comics universe and the persistent world game, can participate in a larger multiple-media universe, but each perform different roles as forms and as presences in a market.

The multiple-media universe occurs across a vast range of commercial products and entertainment texts: films, television shows, comic books, games, and popular novels are the most common textual or literary instantiations, but the iconicity of a multiple-media universe can be found on hundreds or even thousands of different products within contemporary markets, from clothing to toys, to cereal, to home haircut kits, to canned pasta. Its composition is wildly heterogeneous in the market, allowing the user to participate, in a minimal way, in the universe regardless of that user's preferences for

participation. From the broadest view, then, the consumer's interaction with this system can be limited to "mere consumption": a child can buy a *Spider-Man* t-shirt or candy and engage with *Spider-Man* as an evocative visual icon in a market – as an object-code, or expression of meaning in systems of material culture rather than of language – in a fashion outside the bounds of reading, playing, or any other textual interaction within this study. But these universes are founded upon textual instantiations in a more conventional sense: stories. These texts are often described as "mass media," with the implication that they are intended for mass publics. This is partially true, but the audiences intended for given artifacts in a multiple-media universe depend largely upon the medium of the given artifact, and upon that medium's material and cultural apparatus in the market.

The blockbuster movie is often the "core form" of a multiple-media universe: of all the component artifacts of the universe, in general it reaches the largest public audience, and corollary artifacts of different form within the universe are often perceived as descending from or expanding upon a popular film's fiction. Film theorist and semiotician Christian Metz writes: "More than the latest play or novel, a film, with its 'impression of reality,' its very direct hold on perception, has the power to draw crowds" (Metz 4).

This hold on perception resides in film's operation on the level of *spectacle*, which is defined by Metz as "a social rite consisting in a human gathering around a predominantly visual event" (Metz 188)). Metz cautions against overstating the immediacy of this spectacle, noting "…the cinema is after all not life; it is a created spectacle" (Metz 43), but then explains that this "created spectacle," unlike verbal communication, is not, from a structuralist perspective, linguistic. "In the cinema the distance is too short" between signifier and signified: the distance between content and

expression is collapsed, and expression cannot be broken down or componentized without the concomitant breaking down of what is expressed. (Metz 61-64)

> A visual spectacle entails a joining of the signifier to the significates, which in turn renders impossible their disjunction at any given moment and, therefore, the existence of a second articulation. (Metz 64)

Film is expressive rather than connotative: it does not operate within a dual system of signification (signifier/signified) but rather in a direct system of expression. Again, this is not to say that film is without artifice; rather, it is to say that film as a medium makes a powerful argument for its own reality, for its presence as itself rather than as an articulation of something else. It makes such an argument through "movement," through "corporality," and, paradoxically enough, through "hermetically isolating fiction from reality"; that is, by formally and materially sealing itself from intrusion by the reality of the viewer in a way that, for example, theatre cannot (Metz 11).

Film's operation on the register of spectacle predates its operation as narrative: early cinema trafficked in visual shows without novelistic narrative coherence. "The merging of the cinema and of narrativity was a great fact, which was by no means predestined – nor was it strictly fortuitous. It was a historical and social fact, a fact of civilization" (Metz 93). However, narrative has become so popular in cinema that its presence in the present can easily be misread as fundamental:

> In the realm of the cinema, all nonnarrative genres – the documentary, the technical film, etc. – have become marginal provinces, border regions so to speak, while the *feature-length film of novelistic fiction*, which is simply called a "film"… has traced more and more the king's highway of filmic expression. (Metz 94)

However, the incorporation of modes of narrative into film changed film as a genre:

> Before becoming the means of expression familiar to us, it was a simple means of mechanical recording, preserving, and reproducing visual spectacles – whether of life, of the theater, or even of small *mises-en-scene*, which were specially prepared and which, in the final analysis, remained theatrical – in short, a "means

> of reproduction," to use Andre Malraux's term. Now, *it was precisely to the extent that the cinema confronted the problems of narration* that, in the course of successive gropings, it came to produce a body of specific signifying procedures. (Metz 95)

Much of what Metz emphasizes as distinctive in cinema – the uninterrupted experience of movement; the overwhelming visual presence of the film; the absorption by the film of the viewer's perception in the context of an environment that does not compete – belongs to cinema as a material, cultural, and social form. That is, it describes the experience of *watching a film in a movie theater,* which at the time of Metz's writing (1974) was fairly uncomplicatedly coupled with film itself: genre, medium, space and context corresponded in an exclusive way. This is no longer entirely the case – video cassette recorders complicated the factors of location and context for films, while DVD as a medium additionally complicates the viewer's role and ability to act in relation to it – but the experience of watching a film socially in a theater is as popular as ever, and Metz's formal apparatus still applies to this experience and form.

Especially so, one might argue, in the case of the blockbuster movie. Film theorists after Metz have argued that the blockbuster movie amplifies film's natural tendency to spectacle:

> In the kind of films at issue here, elevation of the immediately sensuous constituent vies with our usual means of entry to symbolic meaning, i.e. narrative. This does not mean that narrative content or ideological significance disappear in such films (see, for example, Tasker 1993), rather that this new dimension of visual display is now so distinctive that it requires recognition and analysis as a formal aesthetic element in its own right. (Darley 103)

The blockbuster movie is then, arguably, an ideal medium for entry into a multiple-media universe, or for casual or "shallow" participation in it. Metz writes "the cinema is universal because visual perception varies less throughout the world than languages do" (Metz 64); I would add that this statement holds true not only for languages but also for

context-specific discourses. As we will see later, some of the most productive moments in fiction networking build on a large and mature base of discursive complexity: a persistent intertext, with a coherent and engaged affinity group engaged in its reception, can generate its own jargon and shorthand, engage in dialogue with itself, rely on a shared history too large to retell in exposition. A blockbuster movie as part of a multi-media universe can begin such an intertext, or can indicate an awareness of a larger intertext facilely or in passing, but it is not a medium for resonant intertextual complexity. Its role, germane with its form and cultural context, is to introduce the intertext through spectacle, to allow a mass audience to engage casually with it and, perhaps, to lead more engaged consumers toward a deeper relationship with it.

The comics universe, in contrast, is a breeding ground of discursive complexity. The term "comics universe" may not be an immediately familiar one to readers outside the perimeter of comic book fandom. A comics universe is an intertext built upon a formative, though only partially publicized, tenet of the major North American comic book companies, Marvel Enterprises Inc. and DC Comics, Inc.: most of the comic book properties they own, and the periodical stories they publish, take place in a shared fictional space. Batman and Superman inhabit the same fictional world; Gotham City and Metropolis, though radically different visions of urban space, exist in the same imagined United States. The mechanism of crossover means that the dozens of monthly serials each company persists essentially contribute to one large-scale story.[3] The third chapter of this analysis provides an extended argument regarding this form, but before then I would like to speak briefly about the component semiotic system of the "universe," comics, as a system of representation with meaningful relationships to verbal text, visual

[3] In addition, the numerous "inter-company crossovers" among DC, Marvel, and smaller comics publishers have established connection not only within a comics universe, but among comics universes as well.

art, and cinema. Comics can be seen as a medium with some allegiances to "the basic features of the semiotics of the cinema," described by Metz as "montage, camera movements, scale of the shots, relationships between the image and speech, sequences, and other large syntagmatic units" (Metz 94). Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics,* now over a decade old, has become a respected formal analysis of "comics language" that can be read against Metz; it points out some relationships between comics and film and also describes the ways in which comics are powerfully unique. Montage and gestalt as they appear in film theory are resituated in McCloud's analysis in terms of spatial juxtaposition of visual images and what he terms "closure," defined by McCloud as "mentally completing that which is *incomplete* based on *past experience*" (McCloud 63). McCloud identifies closure in film and comics alike, but distinguishes the automatic, mechanical closure film presents to the viewer – the succession of images in time that creates Metz's "movement" – from interpretive closure in comics:

> -- there lies a medium of communication and expression which uses closure like no other… a medium where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion. (McCloud 65)

While "the *closure* of electronic media is continuous, largely *involuntary* and *virtually imperceptible*" (McCloud 68), comics insists on a voluntary practice on the part of the reader; it replaces the argument for reality in spectacle with an acknowledgement of abstraction and an invitation to the reader as interpretive participant. This acknowledgement of abstraction extends to the visual iconicity of comics, which McCloud presents as occupying a continuum of abstraction: "In pictures… meaning is *fluid* and *variable* according to appearance. They differ from "*real-life*" appearance to varying *degrees*" (McCloud 28). It is the reader's responsibility, McCloud argues, to construct meaning from the abstracted visual iconicity of comics; by delegating this

responsibility, comics encourage a sense of identification on the part of the reader (McCloud 28-45).

Comics, then, replace movement with closure, corporality with iconicity, and temporality with spatiality; in our contemporary media ecology, where comics are played against film regularly as coexistent discourses, comics can be thought of as a productive departure from film, a medium that replaces the passive visual spectacle of film with a set of abstractions that provoke interpretive practice on the part of the reader. We will later see that the second form of fiction networking in question, the comics universe, encourages further interpretive and recombinatory practices on the part of the reader, but it seems important to note that these further practices build upon a form that encourages readerly investment and active practice on the very level of semiosis, and that, consequently, maintains a more present and active space for semiotic self-interrogation and play.

Play as a concept leads us to some analysis of the third form active in this study: the persistent world game, also known as the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG). Persistent world games, such as *EverQuest*, *The Sims Online* and *Star Wars Galaxies,* are networked, multiple-user online environments where users/players not only take on fictional personae and engage with – or subvert – scripted activities ("quests") but also participate in free-form performances and interactions. These games take on the generic conventions common in other fiction networks – fantasy, science fiction – and reiterate the structures and conventions of these genres (agonistic conflict, world building) in a real time, interactive form. This form, I will argue here, is a departure from preexisting definitions of "video game"; however, there is a significant degree of variation in the range of artifacts grouped within "video game" as a concept:

> To address computer games as a consistent genre or medium is highly problematic. From *Tetris* on a mobile phone to *Super Mario* on a Gameboy to

> *Everquest* on a Midi-tower Windows machine there is a rather large span of different genres, social contexts, and media technologies. It cannot be repeated often enough that the computer is not a medium, but a flexible material technology that will accommodate many very different media. Hence, there is no "computer medium" with one set of fixed capabilities, nor is there "the medium of the computer game." Games are, at best, a somewhat definable cultural genre. (Aarseth, "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation" 46)

In the face of this diversity, Espen Aarseth attempts to decouple activity from technology, and presents a common definition of "game" through three aspects:

> Any game consists of three aspects: (1) rules, (2) a material/semiotic system (a gameworld), and (3) gameplay (the events resulting from application of the rules to the gameworld).[4] (Aarseth, "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation" 48)

This process of play, like "ergodic[5] discourse" as described by Aarseth in *Cybertext* – a bringing of rules of engagement to a structured semiotic system, a textual generation by means of an interventionary process on the part of the player – would at first glance seem to be of a piece with the process of reading or criticism as it is described by theorists of deconstruction, poststructuralism, and phenomenology. Derrida asserts that texts exist in a state of play or indeterminacy that eludes closure, that reading and criticism are interventions against the unstable text, but that they do not resolve it. Pierre Macherey

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[4] In this same essay, Aarseth argues that "of these three, the semiotic system is the most coincidental to the game" (Aarseth, "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation" 48). Stuart Moulthrop, in an inline response to the essay, responds with the concern that "such an approach reduces chess to a series of abstract transactions, which may work well enough for mathematics but seems far too narrow for any serious cultural critique" (Moulthrop 47). The content and subject matter of this work will presumably indicate that I would, in the end, side with Moulthrop in this debate; however, I hope it also indicates that Aarseth's strong emphasis on what Markku Eskelinen has termed "the gaming situation" is in my estimation a necessary analytical counterbalance that warns against an approach to video games as simply stories told in new technologies. The goal of this study is to remain cognizant of gameplay as a human activity distinct from both reading and spectacle, and to consider how the "material/semiotic" context of a persistent world game both reflects and impacts its rules and gameplay – for my belief is that, while in some cases, these aspects may be coincidental, in others they are mutually informative.

[5] "Ergodic" is, according to Aarseth, "a term appropriated from physics that derived from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning 'work' and 'path'" (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 1) It describes mechanically interventionary, or, as Aarseth puts it, "non-trivial" action undertaken by a participant in the construction of a text through the utilization of a "textual machine."

situates the literary critic as an agent of recombinatory rather than simply exegetic processes: "Criticism demonstrates its power over the work, for, in the space generated by that initial refusal and separation there is born a new and perhaps different object, something which only criticism could have brought to life" (Macherey 16). Georges Poulet posits in his "Phenomenology of Reading" that the reading process is interventionary, transformative, and necessary to bring a text to "consciousness":

> … it is the privilege of exterior object to dispense with any interference from the mind. All they ask is to be let alone. They manage by themselves. But the same is surely not true of interior objects. By definition they are condemned to change their very nature, condemned to lose their materiality. They become images, ideas, words, that is to say purely mental entities. In sum, in order to exist as mental objects, they must relinquish their existence as real objects. (Poulet 55)

However, while these theoretical engagements have done much to make clear the realities of textual ambiguity and indeterminacy, and of the interventionary role of the reading process, they have done so in *interpretive* rather than *mechanical* terms. Postmodern storyteller Borges' story of Pierre Menard, who rewrites *Don Quixote* word-for-word in what is considered a profound interventionary act, communicates (according to Macherey) that "the book is always incomplete because it harbours the promise of an inexhaustible variety" (Macherey 250). However, the story of Pierre Menard is comic and provocative because, mechanically, Menard's *Quixote* is identical; the reader of Borges' story is left to contemplate upon a radical interpretive action that is, mechanically, indistinguishable. Gameplay, as opposed to interpretive play, does not describe the interaction between a reader and a text in an act of interpretation; as Aarseth describes in *Cybertext*, it describes the interaction between a player and a "textual machine" in an act of physical construction. This category of interaction includes the construction of a sonnet from one hundred trillion combinatory options using Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards de poemes;* it also includes the construction of a textual

experience through the interaction with a game in the act of gameplay. Aarseth puts a finer point on his divergences from "theorists… trained to uncover literary ambivalence in texts with linear expression" (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 3):

> The problem was that, while they focused on what was being read, I focused on what was being read *from*. This distinction is inconspicuous in a linear expression text, since when you read from *War and Peace,* you believe you are reading *War and Peace*. In drama, the relationship between a play and its (varying) performance is a hierarchical and explicit one; it makes trivial sense to distinguish between the two. In a cybertext, however, the distinction is crucial – and rather different; when you read from a cybertext, you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed. This is very different from the ambiguities of a linear text. And inaccessibility, it must be noted, does not imply ambiguity but, rather, an absence of possibility – an aporia. (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 3)

Again, we will see in some detail how these mechanical processes of construction operate physically – and, importantly, how they operate socially – within the shared gameworld that constitutes a persistent world game, and how players generate "second-order" interpretations that are narratives and interpretations that relate their experiences of gameplay. It is important to assert here, though, that *playing* is crucially different from *reading* as a form of activity, and one must be cautious not to elide their key distinctions. As we will see, one of the pitfalls of the multiple-media network is the assumption that the core elements of a branded popular fiction can translate smoothly from one form to another, that disparate forms of activity can be brought together without conflict under the aegis of the fiction network. This assumption becomes increasingly fraught as computer games grow in popularity as a form through which these multiple-media universes can be expanded.

We see then, that the characteristics of "fiction networking" are manifested in radically varying forms. A fiction network can display a relative homogeneity of form – a comics universe, for example, is a fiction network maintained predominantly in comics, and a persistent world game presents itself as simulation to a player within the "form"[6] of a unified, if multimodal, interface – but it can also manifest a broad heterogeneity of form: *Star Wars* as a multiple-media universe instantiates itself in a vast range of artifacts – from the film cycle to dozens of novels to dozens of video games – some of which themselves can be understood discretely as fiction networks. Homogeneous networks generate meaning in accordance with the constraints and potentials of their semiotic (or, in the case of games, simulative) foundations, while heterogeneous networks attempt to generate a unified system of meaning across different semiotic systems, with varying degrees of success. In other words, each form will reflect these pressures differently as appropriate to its form (or aggregate of forms). However, they all operate under like pressures, and display some analogous behaviors as a result of those pressures. "Fiction network" as a term attempts to track common behaviors that manifest themselves across these different proprietary, persistent, expansive, connected forms of fiction, in the hopes that the drawing of cautious analogies will help inform the ongoing development and study of each of them.

"Fiction network" is a category that can illustrate the effects of ownership, persistence, dispersion, and large-scale intertextuality on a narrative or simulation: its progress, its fictionality, its generic composition. "Fiction network" is also a category that places focus on the agents that produce and receive it: corporations, producers for

[6] This "form" is better described as a multi-generic interface, with "generic" reflecting Bakhtin's concepts of genre as a "form-shaping ideology," a making material of a given life perspective within a tradition of textual creation. Chapter 2 deals directly with genre as it relates to fiction networks, while Chapter 4 describes the persistent world game's interface in relation to these arguments of genre.

hire, readers, reception communities. It emphasizes something like the "cybertextual" perspective on reading proposed by Espen Aarseth in *Cybertext*, in that it places emphasis on the user or receiver, who is a key participant in the physical actuation of the text, through a sequence of ergodic operations with a "textual machine":

> During the cybertextual process, the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of "reading" do not account for. (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 1)

"Fiction network" as a type likewise arises from a belief that reception – to varying degrees, in all these particular systems – has an effect on the text that lies well beyond the interpretive: that it can effect moments of physical textual construction and change. However, I posit this with a particular optic toward *social* rather than only *individual* effects on the text. In fiction networks, not only readers or players but receptive communities hold a radical agency; their aggregate responses to a network can and do shape the network's literal evolution. I wish to delineate a space, even within non-simulative networks, between de Certeau and Jenkins' essential but invisible "poaching" or "use," and Aarseth's operative and generative "ergodic discourse"; a space, largely amplified by (but, importantly, not exclusively created by) Internet technologies and consequent changes in cultural paradigms, where the acts of "use" have an increased generative presence and a "non-trivial" effect on an unfolding fiction's mechanics.

These generative phenomena, often, rise from necessity: as expansive and ongoing popular forms, fiction networks become both vast from a macroscopic view and notably ephemeral at the level of a contributing artifact. As I will discuss in detail later, the DC Comics universe is a vast macro-text, the history of which is crucial to its ongoing reading, but the body of which is mostly inaccessible. It is an immense story constituted of disposable periodicals, a reading experience where a reader must construct

a history not from primary materials, but from retellings, which are generated by a interpretive community that reflects not only the influences of a corporate media producer, but, significantly, the influence of the universe's fandom. The scale and the ephemerality of such fiction networks lend a particular critical and representational weight to these interpretive communities, which are, due to the inception of Internet technologies, increasingly coherent, concrete, and embodied in documents and artifacts.

PROPRIETORSHIP

At the same time, a fiction network is not an uncomplicatedly communal form; it is a proprietary thing, presupposing a capitalist context and a concept of regulated intellectual property which circumscribes the textual system in question. This ontology of commerce and ownership – the fiction network's dual status as public imaginary form and private property – casts it in opposition to our generally-held understandings of folklore or the creative products of folk culture. Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* situates the carnival, the symbolic world of folk humor, as a space of escape and play: "one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World 10). Bakhtin's very specific understanding of folk humor is echoed in other critics' more generalized conceptualizations of "folk culture" as a non-hierarchical space of communal expression, a somewhat Edenic space that preexists our current capitalist existence. This conceptualization, arguably, is overly binary, and many critics have successfully interrogated it. Nicholas Daly argues convincingly that "the Hobson's choice of Frankfurt School pessimism or 'folk' optimism has been superseded by a very different

conceptual frame," and that Gramscian theories, elaborated by British cultural studies in the 1980's and 1990's, allow for a reconceptualization of popular culture

> as a field of struggle rather than any particular set of texts or practices. More specifically, popular culture comes to be defined as the site where a dominant culture and a subordinated culture collide… We cannot identify, therefore, a set of practices or texts that is always essentially popular, or oppositional; the dominant culture can assimilate the aspects of an oppositional culture, and indeed, aspects of the dominant culture can be given an oppositional edge. It follows that from this perspective there is no possibility of 'rescuing' some authentic, fully autonomous essence of the popular; rather the popular inhabits that grey area where the less powerful confront, adopt, adapt, or even reject the ideologies of a more powerful group. (Daly 5)

Producers and consumers, as "dominant" and "subordinated" cultures, can be mapped and examined within the context of this "field of struggle." The space of the fiction network is one where such struggle, founded upon hierarchies of power marked by proprietorship, plays out in the space of an ongoing narrative or simulation. The fiction network is, by definition, owned. Its audience understands its reception of the network as a transaction, and even its fans – who invest in the network as a site of recombination and creation, who contribute to the persistent text in their own varied ways – understand their relationship to the network as fraught and "second-class." But this does not obviate their investment in the fiction, nor does it remove their formative impact on the fiction as it progresses.

In this system, meaning is made in two spheres: that of fiction (a linguistic sphere) and that of branding (a sphere of consumption). These networks bear the compositional pressures of a dual identity: they are both fictions, or symbolic systems that present an imaginary space, and branded properties:

> Referred to as "consumption symbols" or cultural icons… commercial brands have significance that goes beyond their physical properties, utilitarian character, and commercial value. This significance rests largely in their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning… Culture-specific meaning typically resides in the more abstract qualities of the commercial brand that provide primarily

> symbolic or value-expressive functions to the individual… what is commonly known as "brand personality" attributes. (Aaker, Benet-Martinez and Garolera 5)

A consumer good, or branded property, is an agent in a cultural system of consumption:

> The system of design and production that creates consumer goods is an entirely cultural enterprise. The consumer goods on which the consumer lavishes time, attention, and income are charged with cultural meaning. Consumers use this meaning to entirely cultural purposes. They use the meaning of consumer goods to express cultural categories and principles, cultivate ideals, create and sustain lifestyles, construct notions of self, and create (and survive) social change. Consumption is thoroughly cultural in character. (McCracken xi)

However, the meaning generated from consumer goods is, according to Grant McCracken in his *Culture and Consumption*, explicitly *not* linguistic. In his study of clothing as consumer product, he plays the concepts of structural linguistics against data collected on consumer perceptions of clothing:

> Each speaker of a language is both constrained and empowered by the code that informs his language use. He or she has no choice but to accept the way in which distinctive features have been defined and combined to form phonemes. He or she has no choice but to accept the way in which phonemes have been defined and combined to form morphemes. The creation of sentences out of morphemes is also constrained but here the speaker enjoys a limited discretionary power and combinatorial freedom. This discretionary power increases when the speaker combines sentences into utterances. By this stage the action of compulsory rules of combination has ceased altogether. The speaker is no longer constrained but free in his combinatory activity. (McCracken 63)

Though the terminology differs from form to form, these general concepts of "combinatory activity" can apply to any of the systems used in the creation and actualization of artifacts in the fiction network: text, visual art, the bi-modal system of comics, software code. With some modifications, they can also apply to an immersive digital environment as "textual machine," where the creators express a combinatorial freedom in development, and the participant exercises an active, if circumscribed, combinatorial freedom in play. However, they do *not* describe the systems of meaning

inherent in clothing or, by McCracken's extension, material culture, which "does not possess a combinatorial freedom and… is therefore incapable of creating new messages" (McCracken 68). The systems of clothing and of material culture provide "a fixed set of messages" for society; they encourage "the use of the code for the purpose of semiotic repetition rather than innovation" (McCracken 68). Consequently, culture can "encode in… material culture information it wishes to make public but does not wish to see transformed," which makes material culture "an unusually cunning and oblique device for the representation of fundamental cultural truths" (McCracken 68).

Material culture is, then, a non-linguistic and "conservative" carrier of meanings in culture. McCracken argues that material culture has a key bearing on identity in culture:

> Categories of person divided into parcels of age, sex, class, and occupation can be represented in a set of material distinctions through goods. Categories of space, time, and occasion can also be reflected in this medium of communication. Goods help substantiate the order of culture. (McCracken 75)

However, McCracken also notes that category membership in North America is fluid and self-determined in a way that it is not in other cultures (McCracken 74). I would argue that this fluidity is intensified – and spread – by the Internet, which can be a destabilizing factor in distinctions of age, sex, class, and occupation, and can enable the cultivation of categories around other distinctions: among these, an affinity for an aspect of material culture in itself. "Fandom" as a concept speaks to a community that coheres not simply around an agent of material culture as an affective sign for cultural values, but also as an ongoing referent to its own position in the culture. Material culture, in this environment, can be read not only as a substantiating agent in culture but also as a generator of its own cultural values: it can be self-referential. It can also be read as an agent in negotiating cultural change, presenting a stable "object-code" that maintains a degree of constancy in

Western society, which, McCracken notes, is otherwise characterized by continuous cultural transformation: "It can be argued that what sustains the West in its extraordinary experiment with constant social change may in part consist in its use of consumer goods as instruments of change and continuity" (McCracken 131).

In material culture, advertising is "a potential method of meaning transfer by bringing the consumer good and a representation of the culturally constituted world together within the frame of a particular advertisement" (McCracken 77). Successful advertising establishes a "symbolic equivalence" between the good and that culturally constituted world, a world of distinctive cultural meanings in which the consumer is meant to desire a participatory role:

> World and good must be seen to enjoy a special harmony. They must be seen to "go together." When this sameness is glimpsed, through one or many exposures to the stimuli, the process of transfer has taken place. Meaning has shifted from the culturally constituted world to the consumer good. (McCracken 79)

Advertising, then, establishes an imaginary world, laden with cultural meaning, and connects the product in question to that "culturally constituted world." This culturally constituted world is limited by "the negative constraints of budgetary limitations" and "the positive constraints of a continuous 'brand image'" (McCracken 78). McCracken situates this brand image separately from "desired symbolic properties" that are "sought for the consumer good," but I would argue that branding and such symbolic properties are one and the same (McCracken 78).

This framework of material culture and advertising in the West is a useful starting point for a discussion of fiction networks, but these networks complicate some of McCracken's concepts. Fiction networks are composed of material artifacts, of the constitutive pieces of a material culture; their primary goal is to extend consumption in a market system. But they are not unproblematic agents of material culture; they are not

exactly concretized "objects" that communicate in the way that McCracken's example forms – clothing, furniture – do. They are, in their various systems of representation, linguistic instantiations. And yet, their presences in a system of marketing and consumption have striking similarities to the presences of clothing, furniture, fast food, or any other consumer good: despite their final status as art, their ontology is commercial.

This argument can, of course, be made for many linguistic works that are not fiction networks – that they are not just works of art or literature, but products that are sold in a market – and postmodern theory and publishing history alike focus on books, artistic pieces, or magazines as agents in material culture. In these analyses, however, there is generally an understanding that the works in question have some primacy in a semiotic context that supersedes their position in a market, that each has an identity as utterance that overpowers its status as "only" a consumer good. Their operation on a linguistic register is contextualized, but not compromised, by their "object-code" as a branded entity in material culture. Although *Sense and Sensibility* was written in a capitalist system, and can be analyzed as an artifact from a historical-economic moment, there are few perspectives that would argue a provocatively close cultural relationship between it and Coca-Cola. And yet *Spider-Man*, *X-Men,* and *Star Wars* – all of which have been deployed as visual icons to sell cereal, bed-sheets, underwear, candy, canned spaghetti, toys – present a more ambiguous relationship when juxtaposed with Coca-Cola as cultural signifiers.

This begs the question: given that McCracken's framework argues that advertising is the act of connecting a consumer good to a culturally constituted world, what, in a fiction network, is the consumer good, and what is the culturally constituted world? How do a "brand aspect" and a "narrative" or "fiction aspect" map to this schema? I would argue that some of the concepts at play in McCracken's description of

advertising are blurred in a fiction network. The artifact (comic book, video game, movie) is, at once, both a branded consumer good and an utterance, laden with both non-linguistic, culturally stable meanings and with the individual potential of a linguistic act. Further, the fictional world represented by this artifact must both, as a brand, present a conservative "object-code" of stable cultural meanings and, as a fiction, allow for a fluidity of meaning natural to a linguistically-constructed space, especially a game, where textual generation rather than representation is the driving operation. Finally, the world is both a fictional world that the reader/viewer/player observes and a culturally constituted world in a system of consumption. The consumer within a fiction network understands both an imaginary space, or fiction, and a cultural space of distinction which he or she chooses to appropriate. Though, again, this dual state of engagement is, arguably, at play with any text accessed in a capitalist context, it is amplified by the fiction network's nature of persistence; as a consumer chooses to engage with the network not only with a discrete single purchase but as an ongoing investment, the network takes on an increasing meaning as a mark of identity distinction for a consumer within a material culture.

One cannot easily assign predominance to one or the other level of meaning in the fiction network: it is as much an agent of material culture as it is an agent of fiction. Likewise, this duality does not only affect the artifacts of the network contextually or externally; this duality is formative, and is indicated within the text itself. The fiction network bears in its text a fundamental conflict between the conservative meanings of a brand and the fluid meanings of a text; it likewise presents itself, on the level of the text itself, both as a fiction and as a culturally constituted world the consumer can appropriate. *This fundamentally distinguishes an artifact in a fiction network: it presents its conventional "object-code" as a brand, and its artistic operation as a creative work, in a*

state of dialectic that does not resolve. This dialectic is visible in the composition of artifacts. Again, this particular duality – network as fiction and network as space of consumer engagement at once – also owes much to the network's formative property of persistence.

PERSISTENCE

> *Persistence means it never goes away.* Once you open your online world, expect to keep your team on it indefinitely. Some of these games have never closed. And closing one prematurely may result in losing the faith of your customers, damaging the prospects for other games in the same genre. (Koster)

A fiction network is *persistent*: though a given artifact (comic book, movie, session of gameplay) might be consumed during a discrete period of time, the overall network exceeds that discrete artifact, and has a continuous life outside of it. Fiction networks generate meaning from a lack of a terminus. They invest not in an ending but rather in the staving off of an ending; if and when they do end, they do not present closure but rather exhaustion. Popular stories tend to be serialized, and tend to persist until they cease to make a profit. In the case of North American superhero comics, this persistence takes the form of a continuous periodical seriality; DC Comics, Inc. began telling the story of Superman in June 1938, but his story continues, with no end scripted or even intended. In multiple-media universes, this persistence often takes the form of an endlessly expandable and detailable world, first glimpsed in an introductory film or other text and then vastly expanded in ancillary products: *Star Wars Episode IV* is over 25 years old, but the plot it began is being extended (and backfilled) in multiple media continuously and also indefinitely. In persistent world games, this characteristic is quite

literal; the persistent world game unfolds, in real time, twenty-four hours a day, for as long as it is active[7] (which is, naturally, as long as it is commercially viable).

Corporate ownership has prolonged the continuous creative lifetime of stories. The Bono Act punctuates the fact that corporate engagement with their intellectual properties has exceeded – and overwhelmed – existing laws of public domain. Corporations have fought and will fight to retain ownership of fictional properties for time spans far longer than human creative lifetimes, and they will continue to produce profitable narratives from those properties. In many cases, the narratives they maintain are, in a fashion, continuous; plot threads are maintained, with varying coherence, for years or even decades. This growing creative power over a creative property has taken a long-popular form – the serial – and has extended it to a new and redefinitive scale.

Serialized fiction is, of course, nothing new, nor is the periodic delivery and persistent or immanent presence of stories in a culture. In his discussion of American serial fiction in the second half of the 19th century, Michael Lund notes:

> …most of the fiction published in those decades appeared first in one of a number of installment formats. The reading of these works, rather than being concentrated in single moments (the dates of volume editions), was spread out over many months' time… As these continuing stories appeared serially in daily, weekly, or monthly periodicals, their impact on America's consciousness was gradual, enduring, and open-ended rather than immediate, dramatic and clearly delimited. (Lund 13)

In his literary history, Graham Law traces serial fiction in England as far back as the 1670s, and presents it as well established in the 1750s (Law 3). At the time, serial delivery in the press was the predominant initial form of textual distribution:

> …a significant majority of 'original' novels published as books had appeared previously in monthly or weekly installments, as independent numbers, in magazines, or in the pages of the newspapers… (Law 13)

[7] Excluding server outages, of course.

We tend to think of this serial delivery as a preliminary to an end, that end being the collected "three-decker" novel that we access as the default medium for the Victorian novel today. But, like much of the serialized fiction we receive today (in various forms – comic books, televised programs), much of that textual output was ephemeral:

> In addition, and particularly in the earlier Victorian decades, there was undoubtedly a vast and still largely uncharted sea of stories, published serially in cheap popular periodicals but never reprinted as books, or at least never deposited in the copyright libraries. (Law 13)

As many scholars have argued, this particular format of textual distribution – serialized, ephemeral – generates meaning in a fashion distinct from the format of the unitary, locatable book. David Barndollar and Susan Schorn present this distinction in a series of pertinent questions:

> What was the novel-reading experience like for the reader more fully under Dickens's authorial control? How did it feel to have to wait an entire month to find out if Little Nell or Paul Dombey had died? And what would the difference between the two reading experiences illuminate for Dickens fans and scholars? (Barndollar and Schorn 158)

Barndollar and Schorn, citing Grahame Smith, point out that "the difference" was not only experiential but formative: the serialized fiction could change as it progressed, in response to the pressures of the market and of vocalized audience response (Barndollar and Schorn 159). A serialized fiction, then, by virtue of its distribution over time establishes a space where reception can have a compositional influence.

In the United States and Great Britain alike, serialization reflected and informed business considerations: writers could leverage the popularity of magazines and present their fictions to an established and engaged readership (Lund 52), and they could also leverage the established infrastructure of distribution and reception that allowed periodicals a wide and popular audience, in contrast to the more rarefied, expensive, and

scarce "impressive and weighty volume" of the collected edition. In exchange, the writer made himself or herself vulnerable to amplified external influences – audience, editorial, market – that, because of the nature of serialization, enjoyed a role that drifted from the responsive to the realms of the co-productive.

At the turn of the century, these systems of distribution and reception that informed popular serial literature changed:

> This transformation of the late Victorian literary market… entailed, among other things, the disappearance of the three-decker novel, the waning of the power of the circulating libraries, and the appearance of a new strain of light periodical literature… more generally, the emergence of a literary mass market was, of course, part of the development of modern consumer culture in late nineteenth-century Britain. (Daly 3)

Nicholas Daly argues that writers like Robert Louis Stevenson and H. Rider Haggard, though termed participants in a *fin-de-siecle* "revival of romance," were actually participating in a "distinctively *modern* phenomenon" that reflected the changes in the market for literature (Daly 9). In the wake of these changes, "modernism and mass culture could begin to be glimpsed as distinct phenomena," as a more homogeneous literary culture of the 19th century began to bifurcate: the literary culture of the revived romance grew to occupy the space of "low" or mass literary culture, while modernism occupied a space of "high" or elite literary culture. Daly argues that, despite this bifurcation in the market and in artistic approach, mass and modernist literature deal with the same "raw materials." In Daly's reading of Frederic Jameson, "modernism provid[es] certain stylistic compensations for the loss of the ability to map the historical totality, while mass culture operates in an essentially narrative register, harmonizing perceived contradictions. The tendency of the former, then, is the fetishism of style; that of the latter towards allegories of resolution" (Daly 8-10).

These "revived romances" and their descendants later came to be known as part of a body of popular literature with a simpler and more market-focused name, "pulp":

> Pulp is not only a descriptive term for certain forms of publishing produced on poor quality paper, but it is also indicative of certain attitudes, reading habits and social concerns…. the term vaguely expresses a field of popular publishing neglected through the overemphasis placed among canonic texts, while for cultural critics it often has meant the exemplary instance of mass culture's propensity to debase everything and exalt the lower common denominator. (Bloom 3)

However, the revived romance is a very specific subset of pulp, whose descendants are neither the popular romances of Harlequin or Ann Bannon, nor the detective noir of Raymond Chandler. The revived romance, particularly in Daly's analysis, traffics in narratives of adventure, exploration, and the fantastic, and its lineage travels from Haggard, Stoker and Conan Doyle to Tolkien, to the contemporary genres of science fiction, horror and fantasy. It also travels from the popular serial to both the superhero comic book and the blockbuster movie:

> The survival of the narratives of Stoker, Haggard and Stevenson on the screen is part of a more extensive continuity between cinema and the texts of the *fin de siecle*. Stuart Hall's argument for a 'break' in the 1880s receives considerable support from the way in which a wide array of popular fiction of the time – not all of it romance – provided, and continues to provide, a quarry for the film industry, the major narrative medium of the twentieth century. Even if we assume that these stories changed radically in their incorporation into a new medium, and through new conditions of reception, we still have to explain why these particular tales should have appealed more to film makers than their mid-Victorian predecessors… there is strong evidence the narrative elements that attracted readers of fiction up to World War I pulled in cinema audiences well into the second half of the twentieth century. (Daly 153)

Daly presents a detailed argument for the affinity between the revived romance and popular film, stating that the "fundamental attitudes to the world' that film expresses as a technology are also… those that mark the romance" (Daly 155). In particular, he argues that the emphasis on spatiality and mobility in the revived romance was well-suited to

film as a genre: "The illusion of personal mobility through space and time that the cinema develops was anticipated in nineteenth-century adventure tales" (Daly 156). Daly argues that fantastic concepts of spatial and temporal motion, such as time-travel in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, reflect "a fantasy of personal mobility [that] resembles that of the modern cinema-goer, who can live through the American Civil War, or the 1960s, or the year 1999 and still have time to get the last bus home" (Daly 156). The revived romance as a genre, then, presents a narrative structure that is amenable to the technological and semiotic qualities of film: this, Daly argues, allowed cinema to evolve from the less narrative genre of the early days of film to what we recognize as cinema today:

> Early cinema is closer to the spectacle of the fair sideshow, or the music hall, both in terms of content and spectatorship… Spectacle certainly retains a vital role in popular film… but it rarely replaces narrative as the dominant element in filmic structure, even in the most elaborate of special-effects blockbusters. (Daly 161-62)

In his essay "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," Henry Jenkins makes a similar point with a different medium, connecting contemporary, spatially simulative computer games with an older tradition of "spatial stories":

> … games fit within an older tradition of spatial stories, which have often taken the form of hero's odysseys, quest myths, and travel narratives. …such works exist on the outer borders of literature. They are much loved by readers, to be sure, and passed down from one generation to another, but they rarely figure in the canon of great literary works. How often, for example, has science fiction been criticized for being preoccupied with world-making at the expense of character psychology or plot development?
>
> …When game designers draw story elements from existing film or literary genres, they are most apt to tap into those genres – fantasy, adventure, science fiction, horror, war – which are most invested in world-making and spatial storytelling. Games, in turn, may more fully realize the spatiality of these stories, giving a much more immersive and compelling representation of their narrative worlds. (Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" 122)

I argue in the fourth chapter of this work that such an appropriation of generic conventions into a persistent world game creates as many gaps as it does connections, but there are connections: science fiction and fantasy are devoted to the establishment not just of narratives but of fictional worlds which those narratives can inhabit. In science fiction, this world-creation often occurs through the extrapolation of formative principles – in other words, some science fiction has the spirit, if not the operations, of the simulative.

As Daly presents an argument for the revived romance as affinitive to popular cinema, and Jenkins posits that descendant "spatial story" genres, like science fiction and fantasy, can be adapted into milieux for game environments, I would argue that these genres also operate on principles that lend themselves well to the persistence of fiction in fiction networks. The first affinitive principle regards the deployment of the fantastic as a mode of fiction, and of "unrealistic" spatial and temporal structures, or chronotopes, in science fiction and fantasy, and the utility of that mode for managing the inevitably problematic composition of persistent fictions. This principle I will discuss later, particularly in Chapter 3. The second principle is the same as Jenkins presents: an emphasis on spatiality in science fiction and fantasy allows the fiction to be viewed not as a timeline to be followed but a world to be explored. Both these principles can be employed in the service of persistence, the constant denial of closure.

There are, then, connections of genre that can be traced from the revived romance to popular film, to some popular computer games, and to the fiction network. This lineage, of course, also implies a progression in time, and in that progression much that we know about media, about the entertainment market, and about experiences of and with fiction have changed. In this new climate, persistence has emerged as a departure from seriality; persistence is not the distribution of connected textual artifacts over a discrete

period of time but the ongoing presence of a fictional template, instantiated in multiple textual artifacts, in the market as long as possible until exhaustion. Twenty-first century media corporations, with capital and resources exponentially greater than the largest Victorian press, produce the majority of our most popular fictions. For these corporations, an ongoing creative work – particularly one without a predetermined end – presents the best of all possible profit models: once it has established reader or viewer interest, it can capitalize on that interest indefinitely, through the sale of new, connected artifacts and spinoffs to that reader or viewer. Consider the multimedia synergy achieved over 2003 by *The Matrix*:

> When "The Matrix Reloaded," the first of two sequels to the original "Matrix" movie, zooms into theaters on May 15, it will be more than one of the year's sure-fire blockbusters. It will be a movie experience that offers consumers one of the key assets of computer products: expandability. By adding exclusive plot details to a video game and an animé-style DVD project, writer-director-producers Andy and Larry Wachowski are being saluted for their digital-era vision.
>
> In the video game, for instance, one of the challenges is to complete a driving mission as one of two notable characters from the movie. The game activity then segues to footage from a movie scene, making clear that for the character it has been a continuous series of events. If you play the game, therefore, you're helping to fill in time and events that are off screen -- and unknown -- in the movie itself. (Antonucci)

While 2003 was an active year for new *Matrix* products, it represents only a high point in a plan for product development that will extend well into the future. An online, subscription-based persistent world game, *The Matrix Online,* is scheduled to be released in Winter 2004, and will persist as long as it continues to profit. The audience created by the first successful *Matrix* film will be tapped until its interest is fully exhausted, bringing Warner Brothers new *Matrix*-related revenue for at least the next several years.

Consequently, while discrete, singular works (e.g., a novel, a self-contained film) are certainly still popular forms in the market, a corporate goal is to either parley those

discrete works into a larger, ongoing structure (a franchise) or, better still, to generate a franchise from the beginning. An ending is bad for business; better to form a creative work that engenders sequels, spin-offs, and continuations, and to sustain a reader's experience indefinitely through the periodic delivery and redelivery of the story, preferably from multiple outlets. Corporations are happy to sell discrete experiences, but are even happier to create ongoing relationships with audience members, for reasons of profit: discrete purchases are one-time revenue generators, while a subscription or a consumer relationship is a continuing revenue stream. An ongoing text that creates this ongoing relationship – the serial transformed and multiplied, without a terminus or even the intention of a terminus – is a characteristic of a fiction network.

An endless story of this sort behaves in very different ways from stories with fixed boundaries, particularly when, in our present understanding of stories, we so crave causality and endings. In "The Myth of Superman," Umberto Eco differentiates the structures of myth, internalized by ancient cultures, from the structures of the novel, internalized by modern cultures:

> The mythic character embodies a law, or a universal demand, and therefore must be in part *predictable* and cannot hold surprises for us; the character of a novel wants, rather, to be a man like anyone else, and what could befall him is as unforeseeable as what may happen to us. (Eco, "The Myth of Superman" 108)

The mythic character exists in a time clearly before or outside ours, and has a consequent predictability and constancy that retellings of the story cannot touch. This mythic structure Eco describes can likewise be applied, at least partially, to our modern myths. Media properties or icons, like mythical figures, have "immutable characteristics and an irreversible destiny" (Eco, "The Myth of Superman" 108) as branded properties; in a consumption culture, they carry stable meanings through their "object-code." In modern capitalist culture, cultural meanings are maintained in different ways, but the cultural

icons are nonetheless analogous: these branded, constant icons have become nigh-mythological to us, familiar and ageless.

However, these icons are *modern* myths, with all the paradox that juxtaposition implies. After establishing the structures of myth and the novel, Eco then posits that Superman – whose story is timeless and persisted for decades, and who, I would argue, could be considered one of the primordial characters or icons of fiction networks – exists somewhere between the structure of myth and the structure of novel or "romance," and therefore has a singular, complex relationship with narrative structure and time:

> The mythological character of comic strips finds himself in this singular situation: he must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable (this is what happens to Superman); but, since he is marketed in the sphere of a 'romantic' production for a public that consumes 'romances', he must be subjected to a development which is typical, as we have seen, of novelistic characters. (Eco, "The Myth of Superman" 110)

The opposition Eco presents is similar to the opposition I earlier articulated between object-code and utterance, or brand and fiction. As a consequence of it, Eco states, the concept of time breaks down in the stories of Superman: "the stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate… where what has happened before and what has happened after appear extremely hazy" (Eco, "The Myth of Superman" 110).

This assessment of Superman was accurate when Eco's essay was written (1962); *Superman* stories at the time were more episodic, self-contained, and "oneiric" with respect to time. A monthly issue of *Superman* in the 1960's had a story (or, more accurately, a number of stories) that began and resolved within the issue; like many episodic situation comedies, the issues all shared a common context, but each established a degree of non-serial independence. The years since then, however, have seen Superman's story marketed as a continuous, serialized plot to an older, more involved

audience; the narrative of *Superman* now unfolds continuously, over several monthly comics and across years, like a multiform soap opera, and it is only one of several existing fiction networks which behave in like fashion, presenting structures somewhere between myths and novels, but closer to novels than before: more tightly and complexly plotted, more defined by causality. Fiction networks thus become a site of complex and acute negotiations between two oppositional structures: one determinedly predictable and timeless, and the other just as determinedly plotted, causal, unfinished and dynamic. These general oppositional structures between stability and change can be understood as manifest not only in levels of register (brand and narrative) or in genealogies of genre (myth, and romance or novel) but in marketing or readership goals for the corporation: entry and engagement. Predictability and timelessness allow easy entry into the text and make the text appealing to new, unconverted audience members. However, the goal of the fiction network is not only to gain readers but to maintain their relationship with the network, and to do so effectively requires richer plots, tighter causality, engaging serial narrative. As we will see, this structural conflict is crucially formative for the network; it must be continually managed, and, when that management creates "seams," it is the cause of compelling textual crises.

EXPANSION

> If your experience with *Star Wars* has been just the movies, you're only getting a fraction of the entire tale. Since the start, the *Star Wars* saga has been expanded through novels, comics, and games. Here you'll find news on the latest releases, interviews with your favorite authors and artists, and much more. (Starwars.Com)

A fiction network is *distributed* or *expansive*: it exists across multiple artifacts or "nodes." Popular fictions are frequently discussed in terms of "saturation" and "synergy" as well as persistence; they may prolong stories, but they also tend to disperse them.

Multiple-media universes, as mentioned before, often have heterogeneous media compositions; corporations try to saturate what Douglas Rushkoff calls the "mediasphere" – the aggregate form composed of all popular media in our culture – with iterations or deployments of a popular fiction. The multiple-media fiction of *Batman* exists within a series of movies, several animated and live-action television programs, multiple video games, and 60 years of monthly comic books, with over a dozen new comics "chapters" added each month. Even single-form networks rely on expansion: even outside of other media, the X-Men are presented in almost a dozen monthly comics, and the massively multiplayer game as an enterprise generates new and continuing interest through the periodic packaging and selling of "expansions" that add whole realms, states of being, or modes of play to the preexisting game structure.

As an aggregate form, a fiction network consists of texts, each of which composes a portion of the network. I call these atomic or isolatable portions of the network *artifacts*. Artifacts generally serve marketing purposes – they are units that can be packaged and sold – but, in many cases, artifacts can be produced outside of a commercial context. In *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins analyzes fan fiction and "'zines," products of a fan culture that appropriates and recombines narrative elements from popular fictions for their own uses (Jenkins, Textual Poachers). As Jenkins himself noted in "The Poachers and the Stormtroopers," these products, increasingly visible to larger communities through the Internet, have an increasingly powerful presence in the network.

Media companies package their fictional properties – icons, stories, settings, conventions, themes, or combinations thereof – and deploy these packages into media and markets the company wants to penetrate. There is "code" or shared convention for any of these properties: icons or narremes, key elements crucial to the establishment of a

recognizable fictional space, that remain constant from medium to medium. Often, this package of elements incorporates both the "object-code" of the network as brand and a limited set of narrative elements; an artifact can evoke the larger fiction network, however, solely with the inclusion of the "object-code" or brand itself. This allows a widespread range of artifacts – radically different media, radically different forms, radically different interpretations – to be incorporated within the larger network and joined by a brand. In addition, artifacts can be directed toward a specific audience or demographic, and marketed to that audience. *Smallville,* a live-action deployment of *Superman* narrowcast to an audience in their teens and 20s, looks very different from *Superman Adventures*, a cartoon cast to a younger audience, though both use the pacing and dramatic conventions of commercial television. At the same time, we cannot dismiss the cultural meaning these disparate works share; viewers bring their expectations of Superman to both, and those expectations complicate the reception of each individual work.

This process should be familiar: generally, we call it adaptation, or, as Eco calls it, "the remake" (Eco, "Interpreting Serials" 85). Multiple-media universes, however, enact adaptation on a grand scale, manifesting not only in a new medium but in as many media as possible, running not only elsewhere but everywhere. These universes, like other fiction networks, arise when a fiction is deployed widely across artifacts, often to the point where the number of artifacts is no longer easily apprehended or quantified. In persistent world games, this deployment takes place in an ever-growing world, based on a server, in relation with a growing population, based on clients; these agents, together, cause the shared simulative space to accrete meaning and history. In multiple-media universes, some of these deployments are discrete and temporary, but many are persistent in themselves: a movie series parallels a television series, which in turn parallels a book

or comic series. This wide deployment results in something both complex and familiar: countless iterations of a fiction, each fairly unique and appropriate to its medium, but each also beholden to – and a referent to – the core "code" that lies beneath it. This deployment, logically, can generate provocative relationships among the large-scale forms being discussed here: Marvel Enterprises' comics universe contains *Spider-Man*, which has been translated into a vast multiple-media franchise; this same comics universe will be translated into a persistent world game by Vivendi over the next several years. Such is the omnivorousness of expansion in the market.

This, however, provokes a logical question: what makes this phenomenon, even if it does occur on a grand scale, anything qualitatively other than adaptation? The answer lies in *connection*: an ongoing intertextuality among parallel, persistent "deployments" of a fiction network.

CONNECTION

A fiction network is *connected*: nodes in a fiction network possess both a degree of autonomy and a degree of interdependence or information-sharing with other "nodes." Given the parameters of a fiction network, intertextual connection is perhaps inevitable. Persistent and ongoing threads of a fiction network, progressing in parallel, will, to varying degrees, bear intertextually upon one another. This often manifests itself in banal moments, "Easter eggs" thrown into a text for the pleasure of the intertextuality itself, as in the 2001 film version of *X-Men*, where the character Cyclops, upon hearing Wolverine complain about the black leather combat gear the team wears, asks sarcastically if he would prefer "yellow spandex," which Wolverine wears in the comic books. However, in many cases, this connectivity can be textually productive. The same *X-Men* film emphasized the original elements of the comic book series – science-fiction metaphors

for adolescence, social change, and the assimilationist, separatist and reactionary political positions that accompany social change – to great success, and in turn inspired the comic book series, far adrift from its original elements after nearly 40 years of persistence, to likewise take a "back-to-basics" approach.

Intertextuality in fiction networks follows a continuum of coherence. In the examples above, and at many points in multiple-media universes, the connecting references are indirect; these moments bear upon their respective texts, but the connection does not have a literal causality. However, in other fiction networks, this intertextuality does manifest itself literally, with narratives merging into one another at junction nodes. The coordinated multimedia narrative of *The Matrix,* and the "expanded universe" structures of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek,* each present numerous texts which exist in the same imagined space and have literal bearing upon one another. Comics universes, as I will discuss later, are fiction networks which complicate notions of unitary or indirect intertextuality, and arise from the literal interdependence of distinct serials upon one another in a relationship called *crossover.* Crossover reaches a zenith in the form of persistent world games, which can be considered as a coherent, real-time intertext that arises from the interactions among corporate producers, their product, and players in a shared fictional space. A persistent world game is a persistent space of dialogue and creation among developers and players who congregate, or connect, within a communal textual machine. To further complicate things, persistent world games, as I mentioned earlier, can and often do appropriate the codes of larger fiction networks to increase their viability in a market.

The intertextualities at play in fiction networks can have implications not only for the texts themselves but for their readers, as audiences become increasingly familiar and comfortable with iterations of fictions that both differ from and inform one another. In

"Interpreting Serials," Eco cites a moment in the movie *E.T.* where the charming alien sees a trick-or-treater costumed as Yoda, and, to the child's dismay, attempts to greet him as a fellow extra-terrestrial. He then describes ideal spectators, presupposed by the text, who would have the knowledge necessary to appreciate the intertextual play of such a scene:

> Here the spectators must know many things: they must certainly know of the existence of another film (extratextual knowledge), but they must also know that both monsters were created by Rambaldi and that the directors of the two films are linked together for various reasons… they must, in short, have not only a knowledge of the texts but also a knowledge of the world, of circumstances external to the texts. (Eco, "Interpreting Serials" 89)

Specifically, the ideal spectator must have a knowledge of the production of the films, and the circumstances that connect the two productions to one another: the ideas shared between Spielberg and Lucas, the common thread of puppeteer Carlo Rambaldi. Eco remarks upon the level of reader knowledge necessary to make such intertextuality work:

> Such phenomena of "intertextual dialogue" were once typical of experimental art and presupposed a very sophisticated Model Reader. The fact that similar devices have now become common in the media world leads us to see that the media are carrying on – and presupposing – the possession of pieces of information already conveyed by other media. (Eco, "Interpreting Serials" 90)

Arguably, though, these phenomena presuppose not only a spectator's possession of external information but also an increased, even if internalized, understanding on the part of the reader concerning both the potential of intertextual play and the mechanics of production that produce the texts. The "Model Readership" mentioned by Eco above, is, according to his analysis, implied by a text, and often takes two forms: " a first level, or a naïve one, supposed to understand semantically what the text says, and a second level, or critical one, supposed to appreciate the way in which the text says so" (Eco, "The Model Reader" 54).

These fiction networks, I would argue, imply a third Model Reader in its text as well: a reader who understands not only the message of the text and its structural or rhetorical choices, but also the contexts and mechanisms of production that have generated the text, and, importantly, the constitutive effect of these contexts and mechanisms upon the text. This reader is not only aware of the business of making fiction networks – the mainstream and cottage Web businesses that generate entertainment news, rumors and coming attractions reports for games, comics, television and film alike all support an audience's interest in the process and minutiae of fiction network production, and a reader's engagement with this news becomes a serial pleasure of the fiction network in itself – but also has some latent sense of the evolving shape of the fiction network, and the negotiations that define it. Because of the countless permutations of persistence, expansion, and connection that could generate a fiction network, each one has an individual topology; because persistence, expansion and connection are ongoing phenomena in a fiction network, each topology is always in a state of flux. A fiction network must therefore continue to explain its own form; it must continually make its rules of engagement comprehensible to the reader, even as those rules change and innovate. The ongoing metanarrative of the network – the story of its shape, and of its rules for reading – is negotiated in the network itself, with an implied Model Reader who will engage with this negotiation. Thus, the fiction network contains not only multiple persistent story threads, but also contains, at textual, intertextual, and/or metatextual points within those threads, information about the shape and composition of the network itself.

EMERGENCE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SCALE

The phenomena of persistence, expansion and connection, in all these networks, serve a purpose of profit; their primary goal is to maximize and deepen consumer engagement. In their convergence, though, they have generated something unintended and new: large-scale, complex and evolutionary textual forms. Fiction networks can sometimes span many smaller artifacts that look more familiar as unitary artifacts or serials. But each familiar artifact is an element of a larger whole, a system organized around common narremes or codes that carry throughout the nodes, and reinforced by intertextual reference.

A fiction network is not necessarily a form *ab ovo*. Often, a form begins displaying the behaviors of "fiction networking" as a phenomenon of scale. In describing the evolution of a fiction network, tracing a form like the DC Comics universe or *Star Wars* as it changes from a discrete artifact or a collection of serial artifacts to a systemic phenomenon, the concepts of emergence theory are illustrative. Emergence or complexity theory attempts to explain macrobehaviors that arise in large, distributed collections of independent entities: ant colonies, slime mold aggregations, or even cities. Steven Johnson describes the common thread in these different phenomena:

> What features do all these systems share? In the simplest terms, they solve problems by drawing on masses of relatively stupid elements, rather than a single, intelligent "executive branch." They are bottom-up systems, not top-down. They get their smarts from below. In a more technical language, they are complex adaptive systems that display emergent behavior. In these systems, agents residing on one scale start producing behavior that lies one scale above them: ants create colonies; urbanites create neighborhoods; simple pattern-recognition software learns how to recommend new books. The movement from low-level rules to higher-level sophistication is what we call emergence. (Johnson 18)

Johnson goes on to explicate a core motto of complexity theory: *More is different.*

> …the statistical nature of ant interaction demands that there be a critical mass of ants for the colony to make intelligent assessments of its global state. Ten ants

> roaming across the desert floor will not be able to accurately judge the overall need for foragers or nest-builders, but two thousand will do the job admirably. (Johnson 78)

I believe that fiction networks can show analogous qualities of emergence[8]. When persistence and expansion take fictions out of the hands of one author, or even a dozen – when an aggregation of stories, serials, and adaptations is old enough, or large enough, to begin displaying sophisticated intertextuality, or a visible awareness and negotiation, embedded within itself, of its own shape and rules – it has undergone a phase transition and has changed from an aggregate of related texts into a network. No network topology is the same, and consequently this point of phase transition cannot necessarily be predicted; however, fiction networks display demonstrably different behaviors from other textual aggregations, and these behaviors make them what they are. Emergence and emergent narratives are popular concepts in persistent world games, where the formative effect of aggregate social behavior and scale are clear and present. But multiple-media universes and comics universes can also be interpreted as emergent forms, where scale and aggregation are better understood with bottom-up rather than top-down paradigms.

For example, compare two popular fictions that currently feature prominently in the mediasphere: *Harry Potter* and *The Matrix*. Both occur in multiple media – print, film, video games – and both are serialized and continuing. However, *Harry Potter* is, according to the terms I have established, *not* what I would consider a fiction network, and not usefully elaborated by this conceptual framework. Perhaps because of its initial development as a series of novels, *Harry Potter* is dependent on J.K. Rowling as a authorial figure. The novel cycle begun by her cannot be authentically finished by anyone but her, and the film adaptations of the novels, by general consensus, have

[8] Grant Morrison, creator for both DC and Marvel Universes, has also pointed out the emergent qualities of comics, though his take is more oriented toward the creative process than the "universe" as a system. (Ness)

foreclosed any polyphony: they have faithfully attempted to replicate the novels as literally as is possible in a different medium, rather than engaging with the novels in an intertextual state of play[9]. J.K. Rowling is understood as a "traditional" author according to a template we see more and more rarely in mass-media fictions; *Harry Potter* belongs, culturally, to her. She has a *creative*, not just a *proprietary* ownership over the fiction, and the fiction is understood not as a tenuous relationship between brand and utterance; it is understood as her utterance, which has been subsequently branded and marketed.

This has something to do with cultural perception: J.K. Rowling is still relatively unproblematically understood as the "voice" of *Harry Potter,* regardless of its status as intellectual property. However, it also has much to do with the fact that *Harry Potter*'s origin form – the codex book – retains a cultural tradition of unitary authorship, a tradition that, due to their respective apparatus of production, popular cinema, video games, or even comics can rarely if ever successfully appropriate. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the series as it is currently being composed is deeply invested in an ending, the seventh novel; it does not operate on an ontology of persistence. *Harry Potter* fits some of the characteristics of a fiction network – it is unquestionably an owned property that makes a great deal of money for Time Warner, and I would not be surprised by efforts to later resituate the novel cycle as part of a larger fictional sphere that can outlive J.K. Rowling's involvement in the property – but its future emergence as a network is, at present, merely speculative, and the concepts at play here do not currently describe it well.

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[9] Since this initial writing, however, we have been able to see the beginnings of true adaptation, and consequently an encroaching multivocality, in the latest film in the series, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, where Alfonso Cuaron makes his auteur's voice heard in the "film language" of the movie. Perhaps more importantly, we have seen creative and subversive fan responses embodied in popular artifacts, specifically *Wizard People, Dear Readers*, a bootleg reinterpretation of the film *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* through its soundtrack, which has been publicized online and in film festivals (Neely).

The Matrix, on the other hand, clearly mobilizes the phenomena at play in "fiction network." Its composition as a macro-text is aggressively "synergistic" or "convergent," and one can conclude that its initial creators, Larry and Andy Wachowski, strove to harness the rules of synergy in new ways, to actively explore the potentials of the network or commercial intertext as a form. While *Harry Potter*'s expansion consists mostly of adaptations or referents to an easily located core text or texts – the novel cycle – *The Matrix* has saturated multiple media with artifacts that expand it as a fictional space. Each comic book, video game or animation presents an unexplored area of *The Matrix* as a fiction, and each has an intertextual bearing on the rest of the network; the movie cycle has conscious gaps which are filled by viewing *The Animatrix*, or playing *Enter the Matrix*. Even the films themselves – predictably, as popular cinema projects – are clearly the result of group production, conceived artistically not only by the Wachowskis but by comic book artists Geof Darrow and Steve Skroce, and constituted by the labor of hundreds of creative participants; unlike the books of *Harry Potter*, the cinematic foundation of *The Matrix* is multi-voiced. What's more, *The Matrix* has been composed to continue indefinitely, most prominently in the persistent world game *The Matrix Online*, where the audience will be brought into the fictional space as creative presences. This emphasis on persistence, on deferring closure in order to promote the next artifact, can be clearly traced in the *Matrix* movie cycle, and perhaps not to its aesthetic benefit, as many viewers lamented the incompleteness and lack of closure in *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix: Revolutions*.

Again, *The Matrix* and *Harry Potter* both exist as media "macro-structures" in the market, but their behaviors as expansive, multimedia fictions are different. This distinction – that "fiction network" is a definition more behavioral or contextual – is useful when discussing the various examples of fiction networks in this study, which are

characterized as much by divergence as by commonality. Though the concepts discussed here should productively inform discussion of multiple-media universes or franchises, this study focuses on persistent world games and comics universes as forms that can be described under this category of "fiction network" in a way that draws tentative analogies between the forms, and, hopefully, contributes to the discussion of both as distinct and, I would argue, misunderstood forms in popular media. I do emphasize the adjective *tentative* above; these forms differ from their larger multiple-media networks, but they arguably differ even more widely from one another. A persistent world game is a literal computer network as well as a fiction network, existing on servers and thousands of global clients. Players access this network to inhabit a fiction; these players have a direct, participatory agency in the progress of the system. On the other hand, a comics universe, as we will see, is the very analog (as in non-digital) result of decades of periodical publishing, where the idea of creative and audience agency are complicated and circumscribed by corporate ownership and the concept of work-for-hire. However, both are, like multiple-media story franchises, examples of large-scale fictions where persistence, expansion, and connection have created organized systems characterized by the intertextual and metatextual negotiation and play of a fiction network. As I present these divergent forms here, I intend to demonstrate that the union of these forms under the auspices of "fiction network," though perhaps not immediately intuitive, can inform the study of all of them as a supplement to strictly hermeneutic or cultural approaches.

The comics universe is a fiction network with decades of history, a well-developed intertextuality, and, as Eco's "The Myth of Superman" has established, much experience with the challenges of persistence. This established form is a pioneer of sorts, and its history can give us clues as to how newer, larger fiction networks may grow. On the other hand, the persistent world game is a young form that is perhaps the most vivid

illustration of the characteristics of fiction networking: it is a branded space of communal fiction-making from the moment it begins, constantly persistent, expanded and connected to the point where "artifact" as a concept is dissolved. Yet, it lies in continuum with the other fiction networks I have mentioned, even if as an endpoint. Just as it is illuminating and instructive to view a persistent world game as a social system, as an economy, as server-client technology, or as a simulation composed of rule structures, it is likewise useful to gaze upon the persistent world game specifically as a fiction, sharing characteristics with other fictions, and as a fiction with particular contextual parameters and consequent behaviors. In this work I will argue that the distinction between "story" and "game," though key to persistent world games, is subordinated in the persistent world game within a multi-generic system that exceeds both "story" and "game." At the same time, the comics universe, a fiction network traditionally understood clearly as a "story," can look, in terms of interactivity, player/reader agency, and the "rules" of genre and social engagement through fiction, much like an interactive environment or game.

WRITERS, READERS AND ROLES

During the course of this introduction I've made several claims which have implications for our understanding of key terms: author, audience, reader, producer, consumer, player. Part of this is accountable to the range of forms at play: games are not "read," and films and comics both rise from commercial modes of production that destabilize concepts of solitary authorship. However, fiction networks further destabilize these concepts in profound ways: as I've mentioned, they can outlive human lifetimes and capacities for processing, and expand themselves beyond the capability of any one creative mind even as they, in their open-endedness and dispersal, create multiple spaces for readers to not only consume but respond to and impact the network. The fiction

network as a system does not accommodate absolute positions with regards to the network, but rather presents *roles* which are mutable (one person can occupy several, depending on the context and moment) and, like so many other aspects of the network, often under negotiation.

Owners of the fiction network have overall property rights to the network, and they take on the bulk of brand management, which, again, is the preservation of a conservative object-code that informs all the artifacts at play. This brand management coexists with management of the fiction – the preservation and sustenance of fictions across the network, and within its nodes. The logic preserved by this management is both stranger and looser than the narrative logic in more discrete forms; in addition, though its goal is likewise the continued profitability of the network, its discipline and interests are different from – and therefore sometimes exist in tension with – the management of the brand. In the process of expansion, owners often collaborate with *licensors*, who do not own the properties directly, but license them and often enjoy a great deal of control over the property. (Sony, Fox, and Universal all licensed intellectual property from Marvel to create the films *Spider-Man, X-Men,* and *The Hulk,* respectively; LucasArts licenses *Star Wars* as a property to Sony Online Entertainment, BioWare and others for the development of *Star Wars* games). This practice conjoins different organizations, with different approaches, under the cultural umbrella of a shared brand.

Employed by the owners and licensors of a fiction network are *creators-for-hire*. These networks often operate on concepts of work-for-hire: more often than not, a creator (writer, artist, designer, developer, community manager) relinquishes rights over creative work to the corporation that employs her or him. In a persistent world game, this work-for-hire concept is taken a step further; the player can often create content in the game space, and is therefore paying to act as a creator, with attendant complications to existing

ideas of intellectual property. Even if a creator were to retain ownership of the work they create within the network, most popular modern creative media – films, television programs, games, even comic books – require in their technical multiplicity or complexity a team of creators, which makes it difficult to locate creativity at a point more individual than a corporate producer. This sits uncomfortably with our ideas of authorship, but authorship as we have understood it for centuries – a sovereign creative presence with individual control over a creative product – can be read as a concept particular to a historical period and to the codex book as an enabling technology. Rhetorician Richard Lanham, in *The Electronic Word,* analyzes the effects of digital technologies on how artistic work is constructed, understood, and culturally contextualized; in a preface to a discussion of the effects of digital technologies on the literary marketplace and academic community, he notes:

> The invention of printing brought a struggle between freedom to publish and profit therefrom, and state efforts to control publication. From this struggle emerged the concept of copyright, the protection of a writing as the author's intellectual "property." Western literature for the last two centuries has been created in a marketplace stabilized by copyright laws… Intellectual property in words may never have been rooted in a substance, an essence, but we could fool ourselves most of the time that it was. (Lanham 18-19)

Lanham provides this historical background as support for his particular argument: that digital technologies reflect and provoke a changed understanding of how one conceives of the arts and letters, that "the great *explanandum* of changing technologies in the arts and letters rests… in the extraordinary convergence between technological and theoretical pressures" (Lanham 17). These pressures can be read in tandem with socioeconomic pressures (the consolidation and corporatization of media production) to suggest a change in how we envision authorship; they illuminate the ever-present exceptions to authorship as a mechanism for grounding a text. As Metz writes:

> …there are the myths, the folk tales, the many narrative films of everyday consumption, which are passed from hand to hand in the course of their industrial or "craft" manufacturing, the many radio and television shows put together by teams (whether as an organized group or in gleeful disorder), etc. – in short, all the *authorless* narratives, at least in the sense "author" has in the humanist tradition of "high culture." (Metz 20)

In the case of fiction networks, key elements of authorship are eroded, or relinquished to a corporate "author" with copyright control, or to a brand which establishes name recognition for the fiction itself. When an creator is associated with a fiction network (Bob Kane and *Batman*, George Lucas and *Star Wars*), it is sometimes assumed to represent an authorial relationship, but could better be described as, at best, an *auteur* relationship, or, often, an elision for the group production that actually generates the artifacts that constitute the network. This elision, if applied consistently, is perhaps appropriate: Espen Aarseth posits that the author's name is "the single most meaningful phrase of the text," a powerful signpost for interpretation, but also far from an absolute indicator of a creative relationship:

> Authors have always known these things. In antiquity and the early Middle Ages, some writers would use the name of a famous author to get their ideas read and spread – not as a villainous forgery with the goal of short-term benefit but as a way to enhance the endurance and position of their work. Think of it as a kind of benevolent computer virus. In more recent times, female writers used male pseudonyms: the fiction was even better if a fictitious author could be constructed. (Aarseth, "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory" 55)

Some fiction networks are produced as a whole under the name of a creator or auteur (George Lucas), while others valorize the work of those who produce individual artifacts that present a distinct voice within the network (for example, comics author Alan Moore). In both cases, named authors have a connotative relationship to the text; they imply "value" as a set of stylistic qualities. But all named authors in fiction networks have, at best, a partial relationship to the system: their voices can stand out, but, from an honest

perspective, they cannot stand alone. Rather, these names must be read as participants within a system of fiction-production that accommodates multiple and varying levels of authorship, and, again, includes the audience as well. Multivocality makes these forms distinct; this multivocality complicates authorship, but is a phenomenon that "fiction network" as a framework is meant to directly address.

As a fiction network grows, logistics dictate that the sovereignty of "central control" diminishes; even as a corporation attempts to saturate the market, it reduces its own ability to fully control the network. Creative power is delegated to multiple positions: hired creative talents, who are employed by the corporation but have a range of individual perspectives or agendas; partner corporations, who employ their own talent and bring their own power to bear in their interpretation of the licensed text; readers, who find themselves with more effective and more powerful modes of creation, re-creation, and communication. It is true that owners still have the most control over the shape and progress of a fiction network; however, the power of a connected audience in open-ended, ongoing serial fictions grows. Story persistence and improved tools of communication and response allow a readership to insinuate itself into the porous fiction network. Fans can become creators-for-hire, or publish their own nodes of the network, or organize protests that can shape the future progress of a fiction, or enter a persistent world game and play it subversively. As a network becomes more persistent, expanded and connected, the permissions granted to the audience are increased, and "author" as a Romantic notion is complicated within a new context: a bazaar of property holders, artisans, users and interactors.

The totality of this destabilization is difficult to embrace; the concept of the sovereign creative mind is culturally internalized and has a lot of consequent power, and consequently we tend to think about creative work in terms of a distinct, controlling

authorial presence and a distinct, circumscribed audience. Even hypertext and new media studies, which embrace the connectedness, multiplicity, and empowerment of the reader inherent in large-form digital texts, has, in the past, had a difficult time letting go of the concept of the sovereign author. In Janet Murray's groundbreaking work on interactive and online digital environments, *Hamlet on the Holodeck,* she explicitly situates a "cyber-bard," the speculative center of online environment creation, who in the future will create online texts with creative power that exceeds both that of other developers and that of the audience:

> There is a distinction between playing a creative role within an authored environment and having authorship of the environment itself. Certainly interactors can create aspects of digital stories in all these formats, with the greatest degree of creative authorship being over those environments that reflect the least amount of prescripting. But interactors only act within the possibilities that have been established by the writing and programming… all the interactor's possible performances will have been called into being by the original author. (Murray 152)

While this assertion seems logical, the top-down hierarchy it establishes – with an author in control of the interactor's world – diverges from the practices of corporate computer game production (both networked and non-networked), where "authorship" is located in teams of programmers, writers, producers, designers, and marketers. Of course, like Jenkins' and de Certeau's concepts of use and hidden production in reception, it is also complicated by the advent of networked interaction through persistent world games, where the game does not successfully limit the user to obedient following of the environment as authored, but makes meaning in the process of ongoing reception and play, and must inevitably accommodate unintended divergences, from subversion of the game structures by participants who master the rules of the game and proceed to challenge it and push it to its limits, to the inevitable emergent behaviors that grow from

complex, large-scale designed systems. Contrast Murray's statement with these assertions made by Raph Koster, lead designer of "Ultima Online":

> *Game systems*
> No matter what you do, players will decode every formula, statictic [sic], and algorithm in your world via experimentation.
>
> *Never trust the client.*
> Never put *anything* on the client. The client is in the hands of the enemy. Never ever ever forget this.
>
> *Enforcing roleplaying*
> A roleplay-mandated world is essentially going to have to be a fascist state. Whether or not this accords with your goals in making such a world is a decision you yourself will have to make. (Koster)

Aarseth in "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory" makes different assertions, with less emphasis on player vs. developer conflicts, but reflects a similar perspective:

> Interestingly, a main goal of adventure game theorists such as Brenda Laurel and others is to be able to control what they call the plot. The user-character will be allowed some leeway, but by use of Playwright, an expert system with knowledge of dramatic structure (perhaps not totally unlike an intelligent version of *Afternoon*'s anti-narrator), the situations and actions would be carefully orchestrated to fit its model of appropriate drama. Although this aesthetically motivated poetics has the goal of creating well-formed dramatic unity, it is hard not to see the potential for conflict between the user and this *deus in machina*. As the history of the novel has shown, the forces of carnivalism will work centrifugally against the law of genre in any simulated social situation. (Aarseth, "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory" 75)

New technologies transform the reader's former, virtual power to rework texts into actual agency; Aarseth's *Cybertext* situates this power as one to actuate text from a "textual machine" through a combinatory or generative process, and, again, places it well beyond the power of the interpretive. When a reader subverts a closed or finished text through a transgressive reading of that text, that subversion has the power to generate meaning, but that meaning is always contextual or external; even if that reading has a transformative impact on how a community reads a text, the text has a literal structure that even the most

transgressive reading cannot alter. However, when an interactor subverts an open online text through "decoding every formula, statistic and algorithm" it contains as it progresses, it is something much more; it reveals the text as one that operates on a mechanics of polyphony, a text where the distinction between author and audience must be reconceived. While Murray, in an analogous analysis of text-based, networked multi-user dungeons (MUDs), describes these transgressions and subversions as interruptions in what should be the natural progress of the text ("Because of the improvised nature of MUDding, a lot of time is spent in negotiating appropriate behavior rather than in story making" (Murray 151)), these subversions can also be understood as endemic to online fictions, and as movements toward a different state, a maturation of a form where both the fiction itself and the ongoing process of creating that fiction must be represented in simultaneity with one another and must oscillate between one another, a form where the "story-making" cannot be cleanly separated from the ongoing negotiation and dialogue over what the story is and where it is moving.

Cybertext argues that such operations are not unique to digital technologies, and that argument holds true here. In analog forms, even in the low-fidelity world of superhero comic books, persistence, expansion and connection force large-scale serial forms into states of operative polyphony and modes where the readership has a formative influence on the text. This influence manifests itself in trends, debates, and slower forms of "productive reception" – until recently, it lacked the immediacy and potency of Internet-mediated interaction – but the social interactions that occur in the space of a comics universe, like the reader-machine interactions that occur in the space of a cybertext, can have not only an interpretive but a physical effect on the ongoing text's composition.

Again, this argument may present a possible temptation to read the fiction network at the opposite point of the continuum from the proprietary literary work, to embrace the "carnivalism" Aarseth himself cites and read such a network as purely communal storymaking, or as folklore. Both fiction networks and folklore are persistent story forms that, in their ongoing and dispersed presence, attain a enhanced degree of cultural significance; both are informed by reiteration and recombination by a communal authorship. The temptation to read the branded entertainment properties that constitute a fiction network as a postmodern, late-capitalist, or post-Internet form of folklore is so strong that Will Brooker, at the conclusion of his *Batman Unmasked*, envisions a speculative reality where Time Warner has relinquished the rights to Batman in a moment of "liberation":

> … the nature of Batman is now such that they could gladly and easily carry him if his institution handed him over. Like Robin Hood and Dracula, Batman would truly become a myth, a legend, his roots in the ur-text often forgotten… (Brooker, Batman Unmasked 333)

I wholeheartedly agree with Brooker that, were Batman to be handed over to the public domain, he would pass into a state of popular folklore; his stories would be continued by the active and increasingly Internet-enabled public that currently engages with the text in a position of fandom. However, *Eldred v. Ashcroft* and the corporate impetus that precipitated it seem to strongly suggest that, at least from our present vantage point, Brooker's vision of a public Batman is actively – and effectively – denied by the considerable resources and desires of Time Warner. This context should not be read as a mere obstacle, but as an informative principle; Batman as an icon is a study in tensions vis a vis his owners and publics. His current owners recognize him as a valuable brand, but must market him with a sense of his accreted history as an icon, and must satisfy a vocal and influential audience; his audience can imagine and create new artifacts for him,

but their practice of "gladly and easily carrying" is complicated by the recognition that they do not own him, that their reifications are subject to the observation and policing of DC Comics/Time Warner and an infrastructure of intellectual property law that supports that policing. The "global fan-factory" Brooker imagines is very much real (Brooker, Batman Unmasked 332). However, their acts of production exist within a hierarchy that privileges the corporation as the canonical producer and circumscribes their own public works with the mechanics of "authorization." In his later work, *Using the Force*, Brooker examines these mechanics as they apply to the interactions between Lucasfilm and fans of *Star Wars*, and offers a detailed study of the fluid, multifaceted, and fraught negotiations among the parties involved with the expansion of *Star Wars*, a network whose artifacts occupy a continuum bounded by "authorized" and "apocryphal."

These negotiations, not the communal operations of folklore, govern the evolution of our most popular media properties, and "fiction network" as a category will hopefully provide a productive framework for discussing these distinct phenomena, for understanding the ways they generate, maintain, and complicate fictional worlds through the aggregation of a range of distinct forms and artifacts. The next chapter takes a closer look at both these aspects of the network here, investigating the fictional world as an emergent referent, and also situating the artifacts and traditions that constitute it through the lens of genre.

Chapter 2: Genres, Fictional Worlds, and Fiction Networks

Among other goals, this work strives to investigate the relevance of the "fiction network" to broader practices of hermeneutics and literary study. In service of that investigation, this chapter is intended to further elaborate the conceptual framework of "fiction network" as a foundation for analysis; it attempts to situate *fiction* and fictionality as operant in a fiction network, and will discuss the influence a fiction network has on a concept of fictional boundaries. However, as the fiction network is not only a fictional entity but also a conglomeration of formal and literary types and traditions, or genres, this chapter also outlines the impact of fiction networks upon an understanding of "genre," as it is used to describe both semiotic (or, in the case of games, ergodic) systems and topoi. I will discuss how the pressures of brand management, mass audience appeal, and persistent novelty result in a multiplicity of all these categories of genres in a fiction network. I will then situate this discussion within a larger framework of genre theory and the work of M.M. Bakhtin to discuss how the fiction network itself functions within a theory of genres. This leads to a discussion of the role of reading communities within fiction networks and a discussion of these networks both as genres and as loci in which genres intersect. I will discuss the important role of "continuity" in these genre ecologies, and their relation to "mastery" of a fiction network, to approach a critical problem: how should literary scholarship approach texts, from fiction networks to other large-scale, multiform fictions or literary structures (hypertexts, Oulipan texts, the *art brut* work of Henry Darger) whose scale exceeds human capacity for processing? A possible solution to this problem lies in this practice of "continuity," in reading communities which arise within fiction networks, and in consequent practices of "distributed" or "second-level" criticism.

FICTION IN THE FICTION NETWORK

Again, the forms at play in this study of "fiction networks" exhibit significant discontinuities. Some of those discontinuities undercut even a common understanding of artifacts as all participants in systems of representation; even as comics as a semiotic system differs dramatically from film or prose, recent scholarship has argued that semiotics as a field does not sufficiently account for the operations performed in the play of games. This discontinuities cascade upwards, and there are consequently radical formal differences among fiction networks. However, there are also often radical formal differences *within* fiction networks, which in multiple-media universes can manifest a complicated heterogeneity. But it is important to note that a fiction network can contain multiple organizing systems – visual, verbal, interactive, and many others – while maintaining an overall representational weight over all these systems. An explication of fiction networks, therefore, requires further investigation of the distinctions – and the overlaps – between what is being manifested (the fiction) and how it is being manifested.

The fiction network is an aggregate textual form devoted to the establishment, reinforcement, and expansion of a fictional space. In describing the role of "fiction" in a particular "fiction network," the limits and boundaries of this space require some attention; the fiction of a network can be multiform, fragmentary, or hazily bounded. However, there is a coherent realm or locus that unifies all the artifacts that participate in a network: there is a imaginary space which they all reference. In *Fictional Worlds*, Thomas Pavel, diverging from previous understandings of fiction that center granularly on the truth-value of characters, events, or utterances, argues that a model of fictional worlds better represents a fiction as it is experienced by the reader. These worlds have a

salience or independence that can extend beyond a given text or author, and can accommodate some variation or inconsistency while still retaining coherence as a world:

> Narratologists distinguish between basic elements of a story – *cardinal functions* in Barthes's terminology, *narremes* in Dorfman's – and less significant elements, whose presence may be dispensed with without the story's losing its coherence and identity. In such a view, it may be assumed that a sequence of conjoined sentences is *basically* true of the world *w* if all important states of affairs are represented by true sentences. (Pavel 80)

Fiction networks operate under a similar distinction: sometimes the non-linguistic object-code of a "brand" is enough to connect an artifact to a larger network, but in most cases there are "cardinal functions" – visual or descriptive elements, core themes – which mark an artifact's narrative as part of the overall network. These cardinal functions can be surprisingly minimal yet still retain a connection to the overall network; the bare elements of an origin, or the outline of a setting, or a relationship between two characters, is usually more than enough. As Scott McCloud notes in his discussion of comic book coloration in *Understanding Comics,* sequences of primary colors in comics have "iconic power," and the juxtaposition of a shade of purple with a shade of green can, in the proper context, symbolize The Incredible Hulk – and his story – to a reader (McCloud 188). Even this simple iconicity – a grouping of colors, the shape of a cape, a pair of sunglasses, a brand – is sufficient to connect a visual narrative to a network: to the model reader or readers it invites, it is enough to evoke a contextual understanding of the overall system. Beyond these cardinal functions, the elements of an artifact can be wildly divergent; as we will see in the discussion of genre, the network often generates meaning by introducing disparate and novel elements into the fictional space of the network.

Pavel's understanding of fictional worlds and reference decouples a fiction, to some extent, from its *artifacts*, its textual instantiations:

> The worlds we speak about, actual or fictional, neatly hide their deep fractures, and our language, our texts, appear for a while to be transparent media

> unproblematically leading to worlds. For, before confronting higher-order perplexities, we explore the realms described by compendia and texts, which stimulate our sense of referential adventure and, in a sense, serve as mere paths of access to worlds: once the goal is reached, the events of the journey may be forgotten. (Pavel 73)

One should not infer that Pavel – or I – wish to assert that form is transparent, or that a fiction – or a fiction network – is not fundamentally shaped by its textuality, by the forms that represent or simulate a fictional world. As I discussed in the last chapter, the different forms at play in various fiction networks – including film, comics, prose, and games – constitute a fiction differently according to their respective traditions, structures, and cultural apparatus. Meaning is generated in a fiction network by the productive interplay between a fiction network's fictional world and the material forms that contain it, and the world is defined by both its texts and their discontinuities. In this system, the "deep fractures" of a given fiction network at a macroscopic level operate differently from the fractures naturalized in their components' individual systems of prose, comics, film, or simulation, as much of the analysis in the following chapters will show.

However, particularly in the case of a fiction network, it is important to stake a claim not only for the texts that compose a fiction, but also for the world referenced by it: the emergent referent of the fiction network exceeds, and has a powerful formative impact upon, every artifact or node that exists within it. In a fiction network, readers or consumers access new artifacts not only to appreciate a new textual experience, but also to re-enter or continue an experience with the world of the network. That desire for continuation may be coupled with a particular form or context – the immersion of a persistent world game, the spectacle of a blockbuster movie, the social apparatus of the modern North American comic book store – but it is as likely to be coupled with a cathexis for the fictional world itself. Consequently, a discussion of a fiction network can

occur on multiple levels, and can give presence to the textual or formal meanings of an artifact, the referential meanings of an artifact, or both. While it is important to declare, and critically account for, the formative relationship between a given medium (film, comics, software) and a fiction network, it is also critically important to, alternatively, understand the considerable impetus devoted to presenting these discontinuous, multi-formed macro-texts as unitary, even if only to problematize that impetus, to understand the large-scale imaginary space as something which, in many cases, exceeds both formal and narrative accounting.

Beyond the demarcation of referent and referrer in the fiction network, however, lies an additional issue: the uncertain boundary between the space of the fiction and the space of actuality. By this, I do not refer primarily to an encroachment of the fictional world of the network into reality, though there are countless cautionary tales, from comedy segments on "Star Wars geeks" to concerned editorials about *EverQuest* addiction, which reflect a cultural fear of exactly that. Rather, the more pressing critical concern involves the fiction network, which, in its persistence and constant incompleteness, reveals its artifice, loses some coherence under the ongoing pressure of the actual world upon it: there is a danger of the illusion of fiction being dispelled by the exposure of the mechanisms of its process. This danger is particularly acute when the network is an immersive, networked digital environment, where players in the actual world see the making of the text, participate in it, and discuss it actively as they are participating in it. In her discussion of immersion in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray presents the uncertainty of fictionality in digital environments: "How will we know what to do when we jump into the screen? How will we avoid ripping apart the fabric of the illusion?" (Murray 106). This uncertainty is perhaps felt most keenly of all in a persistent world game, where players have real-time control of characters and events

and share the power to develop the persistent world as an emergent fictional space; beyond this, the persistent world is not only a fictional but also a social space, where actual social relationships can be formed through the process of communal play. *Distance*, established by Pavel as one of the two operative concepts in the construction of a fictional world, is collapsed: the lines dividing the fictional world, the actual-world process of making fiction, and a sphere of mundane social communication become indistinct, and the boundaries of the fiction become a matter of debate. If, in an *EverQuest* persona of a female troll shaman, I talk with my friend, in his persona as a dark elf, alternately but fairly seamlessly about our days at work, our game statistics, and our shared cultural animosity toward gnomes, is that conversation a fiction or the everyday relation of information? Is it modern drama, or gameplay, or daily communication, or a combination thereof, or none of the above?

In answering this question, it's helpful to refer to the degree of porosity Pavel allows between the actual world and worlds of different truth-value, and his assertion that the boundaries of fiction are fundamentally variable:

> While proposing a general ontological framework for fiction -- the salient structures -- I argue that the demarcation between fiction and nonfiction is a variable element and that as an institution fiction cannot be attributed a set of constant properties, an essence. (Pavel 136)

Specifically, Pavel speaks of an oscillation of ontological systems – fictional and non-fictional – at key points. He identifies spaces which are, at once, both actual and mythical:

> This situation instantiates a remarkable property of ontological systems, namely the fact that they rarely command an unqualified loyalty... the points of articulation at which the two worlds meet in what can be called a series of *ontological fusions*. (Pavel 138)

Though Pavel deals with the mythical sphere – a sphere distinct from fiction – in his discussion of ontological fusions, I would argue that the principle of immersion in online games, particularly networked ones, leads us to consider new frameworks for our understandings of the boundaries between fiction and actuality. Fiction, which Pavel situates as an "ontological landscape" at a comfortable distance from actuality ("a peripheral region used for ludic and instructional purposes" (Pavel 143)) has grown closer to us, or, perhaps more accurately, *we* have encroached upon *it*: immersive technologies reduce fictional distance, allowing us to experience directly, to create as we experience, and to bring our process of fiction-making into the fiction. This is a new type of ontological fusion – we do not assign a greater truth-value to fiction networks, and the points of articulation are far from sacred – but it is, nonetheless, a phenomenon of experiencing moments as having multiple states, as being *both* fiction and the process of fiction-making at once. Though this phenomenon is provocative, and the basis for many productive debates regarding the effects of "virtuality" on our modern culture and experience, I suggest that it can, possibly, be read as something other than a disruption of fundamental categories of reality and unreality. As Pavel asserts, the boundaries of fiction and the relationship of fiction to our lived experience are historically variable properties, and I would argue that at this moment – not only in the realm of persistent world games, but in other fiction networks as well – we are experiencing an evolution in our experience of fiction.[10]

Presently, one of our most popular fiction networks – *The Matrix* – can be read as another attempt to understand this evolution through fiction. The network's first film centered on the establishment of dual ontological landscapes within its fiction – the

[10] I would also posit that we are experiencing this evolution outside of fiction networks, specifically in the sphere of "reality television."

fictional and illusory construct of the Matrix itself, and the "Desert of the Real," the post-apocalyptic "real world" in which its characters "truly" existed – what William Gibson in *Neuromancer* termed "meatspace." The sequels, *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*, then proceeded to transgress the boundaries established between them: the character Neo, endowed with superhuman powers of physical manipulation in the world of the Matrix, begins to develop similar powers in the "real" world, while the artificial intelligence and "agent" of the Matrix, Smith, begins to emerge into the "real" world, which always retains the ambiguity of a possible illusion. *The Matrix* enacts a sense of indeterminacy regarding the boundaries between lived and simulated experience. Importantly, it does so *specifically as a fiction network*, by privileging openness and persistence, refusing to resolve the ambiguity between worlds in the initial trilogy of films, and then further complicating that ambiguity by "opening the Matrix" to the audience in the forthcoming persistent world game *The Matrix Online*. By not only inviting the reader/player to "enter the Matrix" interactively, but also establishing a fictional world where this interactivity itself has a central symbolic meaning, *The Matrix* makes meaning not only as a film cycle or franchise but as a networked fiction.

GENRE AND THE FICTION NETWORK

> … there are certain "syntactical procedures" that, after frequent use as *speech,* come to appear in later films as a language system: They have become conventional to a degree. (Metz 41)

Though the represented space of the network deserves attention, it inhabits a multiplicity or heterogeneity of forms within the fiction network; the network is fundamentally an aggregate, and analysis of a network also requires analysis of the various categories of form, medium, and narrative convention that, together, compose the

network. The network is both a represented space and the totality (and history) of the presences and interactions of artifacts, and of types of artifacts. While we have discussed some of the formal categories along which fiction networks can be categorized (film, comics, games), there are multiple taxonomies that can be used to categorize artifacts: taxonomies of technologies (codex, DVD, non-networked games, networked games); taxonomies of packaging and marketing (the game expansion, the monthly comic book, the collected graphic novel, the blockbuster event movie, the half-hour cartoon); taxonomies of ergodic practice (exploration, combat, socializing, rebellion); taxonomies of popular narrative convention (superhero fantasy, noir, sword-and-sorcery fantasy, magic realism).

I propose that *genre*, as a broadly-drawn analytical perspective, can be brought productively to these taxonomies, to the process of aggregation in a fiction network, and to fiction networks themselves as spheres of activity. For Mikhail Bakhtin, genre as a concept was an overarching concern. Bakhtin's analysis of genres centered on speech and linguistics, and in "The Problem of Speech Genres" he specifically situates his study as bringing a needed emphasis on language to genre study:

> Literary genres have been studied more than anything else. But from antiquity to the present, they have been studied in terms of their specific literary and artistic features, in terms of the differences that distinguish one from the other (within the realm of literature), and not as specific types of utterances distinct from other types, but sharing with them a common *verbal* (language) nature. (Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays 61)

However, while Bakhtin's concern was largely with speech and with the utterance – his assertion is that "a particular function… and the particular conditions of speech communication specific for each sphere give rise to particular genres, that is, certain relatively stable thematic, compositional, and stylistic types of utterances" (Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays 64) – there have been productive extensions of his

ideas into other modes of expression and forms of activity. According to Morson and Emerson's analysis of Bakhtin and his theories of genre:

> …genres for Bakhtin are not a strictly literary phenomenon. Rather, literary genres are themselves just a specific type of "speech genre"; Voloshinov went still further and argued that speech genres are themselves part of another complex he called "life genres"… (Morson and Emerson 291)

A review of scholarly work based on Bakhtin's theories, such as the work collected at the Bakhtin Centre's online archive, gives one a sense of the range of uses for genre theory; the archive alone references applications of concepts of genre to film, television, the visual arts, and even anthropological analysis of modern South African society (Bakhtin Centre Home Page).

Given this range, what, then, is a genre? Morson and Emerson present the theories of genre presented by Bakhtin and his school as a reaction to "Formalist atomism" that envisioned literary work as the sum of its atomic parts. In lieu of a view of genre as an aggregation of devices, Bakhtin and kindred theorists (including Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Voloshinov) presented a view of genres as traditions of perspective, ways of seeing and constructing meaning. These traditions are presented as social, and embodied in material output:

> Genres convey a vision of the world not by explicating a set of propositions but by developing concrete examples. Instead of specifying the characteristics of a worldview, as philosophical theories might, they allow the reader to view the world in a specific way. A particular sense of experience, never formalized, guides the author's efforts in creating her or his work. Each author who contributes to this genre learns to experience the world in the genre's way, and, if the work is significant and original, to enrich the genre's capacity for future visualization. In short, a genre, understood as a way of seeing, is best described neither as a "form" (in the usual sense) nor as an "ideology" (which could be paraphrased as a set of tenets) but as "form-shaping ideology" – a specific kind of creative activity embodying a specific sense of experience. (Morson and Emerson 282)

While *genre* in the Bakhtinian framework is the ideology which shapes forms, media scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have presented similar arguments about *media*, or, in other words, about forms shaped by ideology:

> Media function as objects within the world – within systems of linguistic, cultural, social, and economic exchange. Media are hybrids in Latour's sense and therefore real for the cultures that create and use them. Photography is real – not just as pieces of paper that result from the photographic process, but as a network of artifacts, images, and cultural agreements about what these special images mean and do. Film is real; its reality is constituted by the combination of the celluloid, the social meaning of celebrity, the economics of the entertainment industry, as well as the techniques of editing and compositing. The reality of digital graphics and the World Wide Web is attested to by the web of economic and cultural relationships that have grown up in a few years around the products from Netscape and Microsoft. (Bolter and Grusin 58)

Both genre and media have been described in terms of modes of viewing and representing reality, traditions which inform the production of artifacts. Though Bolter and Grusin use the term "medium" to describe "the formal, social, and material network of practices that generates a logic by which additional instances are repeated or remediated, such as photography, film, or television" (Bolter and Grusin 273), this definition is closely aligned with genre as understood in Bakhtin's work. "Media" and "genre" can, then, be read as two terms situated within the same phenomenon – a tradition of understanding meaning, manifested in material output – but with slightly different optics: genre places an emphasis on the informative tradition, while media places it on its material instantiations.

Since this work strives to shed light on the "fiction network," which I read as a referent, a commercial meaning-structure that informs the output of artifacts, I will be placing more emphasis on genre. However, Bolter and Grusin's definition extends an important potential that Bakhtin's does not: while Bakhtin's emphasis and interest lies in *speech* genres, linguistic manifestations of cultural traditions, Bolter and Grusin's

concept of media has an allegiance with Voloshinov's concept of "life genres" as cited above; that is, media, as defined by Bolter and Grusin, expands these manifestations beyond the realm of speech into other technologies and modes of output.

Defining genre with some definitional breadth is necessary for a productive analysis of the fiction network in terms of genre. For our purposes, and building from the work of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Morson and Emerson, and Peter Rabinowitz (who describes genres as sets of expectations, or "interpretive strategies," a reader brings to a work (Rabinowitz)), I define genres here as *abstract characteristics in aggregate, dynamic but reflective of traditions of production and reception, that inform the composition and reception of an artifact within the fiction network*. Genre, then, can in this broad sense cover all the categorical taxonomies we mentioned, from the semiotic structure of the artifact to the narrative conventions bearing upon the system. However, these disparate and independent taxonomies also require respective distinctions, individual terminologies that allow us to discuss their differences. Though both semiosis and narrative convention fall within the sphere of "genre," they merit distinct qualifiers, particularly in the heterogeneous environment of a fiction network.

Technological Genres, Semiotic Genres, and Media

Fiction networks often put into play a multiplicity of technologies – tools that perform functions, including interaction, processing, storage – as well as a multiplicity of semiotic systems, or tools that represent meaning, and ergodic systems, tools that allow the construction or production of meaning. In these networks, representation or simulation as functions naturally deserve distinct attention, and this study devotes more attention to these operations than to others. However, these systems can be seen as a subset of a larger category of "technologies"; a semiotic system is a technology that

performs a function of representation, an ergodic system a technology that performs a function of semiotic construction.

Again, and very importantly, genre as a concept does not limit itself to semiosis, to texts, or to literary forms. "Bakhtin and the members of his circle (P.N. Medvedev and V.N. Voloshinov) emphasized that genres are not simply text types; they are culturally and historically grounded ways of 'seeing and conceptualizing reality'" (Spinuzzi 41). Thus, genres can be seen as at play even in non-semiotic technologies, and in artifacts that perform functions other than narrative or representation. To use just one mundane example, a mobile phone as an artifact emerges from a tradition of viewing the world, and, if the phone is a "significant and original" artifact (if it, for example, combines mobile phone technology with personal digital assistant technology to create an artifact that merges the two genres of technology), it "enriches the genre's capacity for future visualization."

Though this point may seem a strange one, it is important to make in the case of fiction networks. These are, primarily, fiction systems: their purpose is to maintain and develop fictional worlds (and to consequently generate profit). However, there are other communicative and functional processes in the system, concurrent to or parallel with narrative processes, that have a systemic influence. Social communications among creators and reading groups; rule systems and algorithms in online games[11]; messaging systems integrated with the "window" interface for a persistent world: these artifacts are not narrative, yet they have a formal and formative weight upon the network, and cannot simply be viewed as external to it. "Fiction network" as a concept gives a primacy to the semiotic and narrative genres at play in these entities, but other concepts may give a

[11] As previous and upcoming discussions of gaming discuss, this non-semiotic functions are as crucial as narrative for understanding the shape and behaviors of persistent world games as fiction networks.

greater weight to other technological genres, and these concepts will also contribute to a larger understanding of how these entities function.

Semiotic technologies, and the systems that produce them, coalesce into examples of *media*. Bolter and Grusin apply this understanding of media to an investigation of a "double logic" that informs our pleasures with media[12] both as a "transparent" delivery system of content and as a tangible sign in itself. They posit:

> Like other media since the Renaissance – in particular, perspective painting, photography, film, and television – new digital media oscillate between immediacy and hypermediacy, between transparency and opacity. (19)

I would argue that, in the case of the multiple-media universe, a similar oscillation occurs on the level of semiotic genre: each semiotic system used in such a network contains its own parameters and system of representation, within which the universal narrative of the network must be manifested. The reader accepts the distinct representation of the multiple-media network within the semiotic genre, and accepts that each semiotic genre actuates in a way distinct from every other semiotic genre. However, the reader also understands the common connection to the network as a whole, particularly when the artifact not only reflects its own semiosis, but approximates other semiotic genres in order to foreground the multiplicity of semiotic categories in the network (as in the case of the 2003 movie *The Hulk*, where Ang Lee attempted to mimic the semiosis of comics within his film).

Throughout this study, then, I will refer to the generic categories based upon semiotic systems as *semiotic genres*, and generic categories based upon narrative conventions as *topical genres*[13].

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[12] Bolter and Grusin's definition of the term differs from mine; they subsume form within medium in *Remediation* (their definition of medium is: "The formal, social, and material network of practices that generates a logic by which additional instances are repeated or remediated, such as photography, film, or television" (273)), while I am trying to maintain a distinction between the two.

[13] Thanks to David Barndollar for his coinage of "topical genre" as a term for this group of categories.

Topical Genres

In reading a fiction network, one brings interpretive strategies based not only upon an artifact's semiotic genre but also its presence within the network. Most viewers of a film such as Tim Burton's *Batman* have expectations for it that are specific not only to its semiotic genre as a movie but to its position in the network, as part of the overarching structure known as "Batman." These expectations involve the reiteration of and, at the same time, the making new of a narrative for which, through present or past engagement with the network, most viewers understand as either immediately relevant or nostalgic. These viewers expect a degree of exposition and a degree of self-containment within the film, as is appropriate for its status as spectacle for a mass audience, but most have an understanding of "Batman" from previous experience, however involved, and also expect a degree of loyalty to the narrative "truths" or trends of the network as a whole (or, at least, the network as they understand it).

The reader of a comic book that exists within a comics universe as a network, such as *Planetary/Batman: Night on Earth*, on the other hand, will often carry a very different set of expectations. She or he will bring some of the same expectations to the text that the movie viewer will, but will also bring supplemental expectations: those pertaining to the semiotic genre of comics, those pertaining to the artifact's form as a stand-alone, square-bound "prestige edition" text, and, perhaps most importantly, those pertaining to the text's presence in the network as a *crossover*, as a juxtaposition of the discrete narratives of two distinct comics serials, brought together within the larger narrative of the universe.

Planetary/Batman: Night on Earth describes the encounter between Planetary, a team of superhuman "mystery archaeologists" who investigate superheroic or fantastic phenomena in a narrative fashion similar to the investigation of supernatural phenomena

seen in *The X-Files*, and Batman, who I will assume requires no additional description (Ellis, Cassaday and Baron). Planetary, like Batman, are a property of DC Comics, but the narrative space they inhabit, the "Wildstorm Universe," is best understood as a subsidiary universe, a distinct narrative space from the one inhabited by Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman and the other, more familiar denizens of the "mainstream" DC universe. However, of course, the boundaries between these spaces are always porous, and, through a convention of "dimensional shifting," *Night on Earth* presents the first encounters between the characters. Frequent shifts during the course of the plot allow Planetary to meet Batman several times, at several points in his history: Bob Kane's original, gun-wielding vigilante; the campy figure cut by Adam West on the television show; the lithe detective drawn by Neal Adams in the 1970s; and, Frank Miller's hulking urban sociopath of the 1980s.

The reader of *Planetary/Batman* (who is most likely an "initiate" to superhero comic books as a situated sphere of discourse, and has most likely bought this comic in a specialty store, which requires a degree of commitment to the narrative beyond the casual) will likely understand on some level that a crossover such as this generates pleasure from the collision of multiple sets of her interpretive strategies, that the crossover's generic pleasure lies paradoxically in its generic instability or novelty. The crossover is a topical genre whose guiding characteristic is the innovative juxtaposition of familiar topical genres. This reader, if she has followed *Planetary* as a serial, will also understand that its pleasures stem to a large degree from its active metatextuality, that it is, as Geoff Klock describes it, an "investigation of fiction through fiction, on the plane of fiction" (Klock 155). In *Planetary/Batman*, this metatextual, investigative lens is focused upon Batman, who appears here as Bat*men*, each of whom presents one of the many topical genres with which Batman has been read over his lifetime. The expectation that

the reader will not only understand but pleasurably engage with a juxtaposition of generic spaces, as well as a metatextual investigation of how genres function in the network, indicates that the reader is seen not simply as an agent of generic interpretive strategies but as an agent of multiple active interpretive and meta-interpretive strategies peculiar to this network.

This suggests that the fiction network is a type of genre in itself, and, logically, it is: a fiction network – an aggregate of narrative elements across texts, interpreted by a readership – is, like a genre, a "form-shaping ideology," a tradition of perspective that informs the material output of representations, and, in the case of games, the structures and axioms of interaction and participation. Each fiction network, like a genre, presents a particular proliferation of narrative elements or conventions, or understood interpretive strategies. The conventions of a given fiction network are, I believe, internalized as popular genre conventions have been, and one might argue that some networks with particular longevity, such as *Star Trek*, are already commonly understood not only as networks, but as conventional topical genres.

However, as I have established, "genre" as a concept has a very broad aegis, and requires distinctions within itself. Just as a semiotic genre and a topical genre differ from one another, fiction network "genres" (multiple, since *each* shares the qualities of a genre) differ from both as examples of genres. The first distinguishing factor between a fiction network from other conventional types of genre is, of course, the influence of corporate oversight and marketing, the *proprietorship* that informs each. The common artifacts of a fiction network are identifiable not only through their common narrative conventions, but also through the branding of that aggregate of conventions. *Brand management* as a concept is most relevant here:

> [Brand management] seeks to increase the product's perceived value to the customer and thereby increase brand equity. Marketers see a brand as an implied

> promise that the level of quality people have come to expect from a brand will continue with present and future purchases of the same product. (Brand Management -- Wikipedia)

Brand management – the maintenance of a degree of consistency and cohesion within a network's conservative "object-code" of meanings within a market system – creates a different understanding of the relationships between texts, even when not all the texts are explicitly branded as part of a group. Superhero characters Supreme and Apollo are not just understood as variations on a superman type: they are variations on *Superman*, and their stories not only have an effect on the evolution of the superhero genre – they affect the ongoing evolution, or brand equity, of Superman himself as a carrier of meanings in contemporary global capitalism. Variations on a convention within a fiction network are therefore not only sites of evolution for a genre but sites of potential anxiety for those invested in brand management, and these variations consequently face the evaluative and possibly punitive eye of owners as well as readers.

I must also reiterate that fiction networks tend to share as a common thread the ongoing interplay between, and absorption of, multiple genres, often semiotic as well as topical. The comics universe, in particular, creates a range of genre connections so widespread that it may seem nearly absurd at first description. The comics series *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, which I will discuss in detail later, routinely juxtaposes Western genre conventions with superheroes, World War II action with science fiction utopia, sword-and-sorcery with post-apocalyptic industrial dystopia. These juxtapositions maintain the strangeness that a reader might expect, but at the same time they are understood as logical within the space of the network. As another example, the movie-critic community has rightly noted the genre mixing of *The Matrix*:

> If you've never seen a John Woo film, any of the "Alien" movies, "Blade Runner" or either of the Terminators, or if you believe the Borg was a medieval castle and "City of Lost Children" was one of the more obscure Italian neorealist films, then

> you can do all your pop-culture homework in one fell swoop. "The Matrix" is all of those films, as well as a video game, a primer on Zen Buddhism and a parable of the Second Coming. (O'Hehir)

The Matrix itself, as a virtual space like the Holodeck, provides a device the persistent network can use to appropriate topical genres as necessary.

To read this common phenomenon in fiction networks as only a generic phenomenon – to understand this mixing of genres into new configurations as only a sign of the generation of new popular genres – forecloses an appreciation of the network's power as a space where genres are placed against one another for the sake of narrative innovation. As *Planetary/Batman* and Ang Lee's *Hulk* show, the network can be a site of elaborate generic play, and the reading pleasures of these texts – and of countless other texts within a comics universe or other fiction networks – stem from the reader's recognition that her preexisting interpretive frameworks are being recombined:

> …these graphic novels and films resist any kind of easy "re-genrefication." Though they are composed entirely of generic material that remains clearly marked as such within these texts, their very hybrid nature works at cross purposes with the accepted notion of genre as a recognizable, coherent set of formulae that audiences may read predictively. (Collins 179)

If a genre is, as Morson and Emerson assert in their reading of Medvedev, "a specific way of visualizing a given part of reality" (Morson and Emerson 275), then the network, through juxtaposition, makes explicitly manifest the contingency and relativity of each way of visualization.

This constant recombination and juxtaposition of genres is simply a consequence of the parameters of a fiction network. A fiction network's narremes are generally understood as genre-as-formula, a discrete, familiar package of recognizable narrative elements. However, a fiction network's open-ended persistence presents a familiar problem: the formula becomes formulaic. A fiction without closure, without an ending,

must deal with the inevitability of exhaustion. To maintain a successful persistent fiction, the familiar narremes must be reworked into novel concepts, or juxtaposed with other narremes. New genres and new genre combinations must be incorporated into the network if the network is to remain compelling to the reader. As the network strives to maintain the network's progress and novelty over time, its goal becomes the generation and regeneration of a vital heterogeneity of genres[14]. We will see later that, if the corporate manager of a fiction network does not succeed in doing this work, interactors will do it themselves, for their own ends. I would argue that popular audiences are, at this cultural moment, as comfortable with this juxtaposition as with the more unitary conventions of popular genre: as Janet Murray states, "To be alive in the twentieth century is to be aware of the alternative possible selves, of alternative possible worlds, and of the limitless intersecting stories of the actual world" (Murray 39). Indeed, audiences do not only welcome this multiplicity: they demand it. To participate in a fiction network is to expect compelling novelty and innovation in reward for an ongoing commitment. At the same time, this novelty and innovation must be played against the demands of stability and fixity brought to the system by a brand; even as genre recombination and innovation become the key pleasures in the reception of a fiction network, they do so within a system that maintains a fraught relationship with this recombination and innovation, and consequently deforms it.

In his essay "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin makes very similar statements about the novel: "The novel is not merely one genre among other genres" (Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 4):

> The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and

[14] In ecological terms, the network as a system is maintaing "species diversity."

> incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them. (Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 5)

Bakhtin attributes the strangeness of the novel as a genre – and its defamiliarizing impact on other genres – to characteristics we have seen at play in fiction networks: youth, self-consciousness, scale. Most important to Bakhtin, however, is the novel's proximity to language and time; he argues that the novel emerges from a fundamentally polyglot and multiple understanding of language, and that this consequently effects a "radical change… in the temporal coordinates of the literary image" (Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 11). In contrast to the epic – a "monochronic" genre which, Bakhtin argues, has "no place… for any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy" (Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 15) – the novel, even if written in the long past, exists in a open relationship with temporality, the present, and the passage of time in the world; even past moments are "contemporized" and made comprehensible within the environment of the present (Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 21). The novel brings both itself and past genres into the discursive realm of the present; it is in a perpetual state of proximity with the real and contemporary moment, and this ongoing spontaneity both makes it a dynamic and evolutionary genre and enables its problematization of other genres.

Again, Bakhtin conceives of the novel as an "anti-genre" within a conceptualization of "speech genres," and understands its operations as existing within linguistic systems of meaning and communication. All of the fiction networks I describe here – the multiple-media universe, the comics universe, the persistent world game – exceed or complicate easy translations of his concepts. However, a conceptual interplay between Bakhtin's concepts of the novel and the fiction network as a category allow us to see where fiction networks also problematize and productively destabilize genres as

described in our broader conception. Consider the general concept of centripetal and centrifugal forces at play in both the novel and in larger concepts of genre:

> The cultural world, Bakhtin argues, consists of both "centripetal" (or "official") and "centrifugal" (or "unofficial") forces. The former seek to impose order on an essentially heterogeneous and messy world; the latter either purposefully or *for no particular reason* continually disrupt that order. (Morson and Emerson 30)

Many of the pressures informing these networks can be discussed in terms of centripetal and centrifugal forces at play. There is, again, the complication of proprietorship; the network's corporate impetus toward brand management and stability in material culture – an impetus that can be read as centripetal. There is also, as we will discuss later, the centripetal practice of "continuity," which is the attempt at resolution of the inevitable discontinuities of a complex network through the creation of unifying narratives.. These practices must negotiate and coexist with the inevitable centrifugal forces that impact the network. Most obvious is the centrifugal influence of large numbers of people, all of whom contribute to the production of the network and therefore guarantee its heterogeneity. This communal production contributes to the inevitable accumulation of discontinuity, illogic, and divergent meanings that a large-scale system of information will inevitably accumulate. In a multiple-media universe, these discontinuities are frequently the result of "polymedia," where the desire for market saturation leads producers to explore multiple types of material output, and to therefore experience the divergences inevitable to a story told in multiple forms. Perhaps most relevant to this comparison, however, is the operative presence of persistence in a fiction network, and the literal (as opposed to generic) effect it has on the composition of a fiction network.

Coupled with these concepts of genre are concepts of chronotopes, or understandings of reality, often in terms of space and time, that are particular to each genre as a way of seeing or constructing meaning. Bakhtin's writing on the chronotopes

attendant to the novel is extensive, but most relevant here is his assertion that, in the novel, causality and history find a clear presence:

> For the first time in artistic-ideological consciousness, time and the world became historical: they unfold, albeit at first still unclearly and confusedly, as becoming, as an uninterrupted moment into a real future, as a unified, all-embracing and unconcluded process. (Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 30)

Bakhtin asserts that this state of "unconcluded process," this indeterminacy and contemporaneity of the novel is mitigated by a formal sense of closure:

> The absence of internal conclusiveness and exhaustiveness creates a sharp increase in demands for an *external* and *formal* completeness and exhaustiveness, especially in regard to plot-line. The problems of a beginning, an end, and "fullness" of plot are exposed anew. (Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 31)

Epic, conversely, requires no formal closure, because the world it represents is already complete:

> The absolute past is closed and completed in the whole as well as any of its parts. It is, therefore, possible to take any part and offer it as the whole. One cannot embrace, in a single epic, the entire world of the absolute past (although it is unified from a plot standpoint) – to do so would mean a retelling of the whole of national tradition, and it is sufficiently difficult to embrace even a significant portion of it. But this is no great loss, because the structure of the whole is repeated in every part, and each part is complete and circular like the whole. One may begin the story at almost any moment, and finish at almost any moment. (Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 31)

By extension of this framework, however, most fiction networks have neither formal or referential closure to rely upon. Polyglot in practice – constituted by a multiplicity of voices and artifacts – fiction networks cannot maintain a discursive stasis. Beyond this, fiction networks usually meet the narrative desires of contemporary readers and participants by maintaining a quasi-novelistic connection to time. These networks are often built upon genres of adventure, with genealogical allegiances to what Bakhtin identifies as ahistorical "adventure time," and to the similarly ahistorical travel novel and

the novel of ordeal[15]; however, the demands of consumer expectation (dynamism and novelty), or even of technology (a persistent, real-time fictional simulation presents an undeniable temporal causality and historicity) often force an encroaching sense of causality. Indeed, if the network lacks change, progress or causality, then it lacks a compelling means of maintaining consumer engagement. At the same time, the network persists indefinitely; the progress of the narrative does not ever resolve with a formal closure. In addition to these operative factors, the pressures of brand management require that the progress of the network be artificially restrained; it may not disrupt the stable meanings crucial to the network's health in a market.

The result of these contextual factors is, often, chronotopically fragmented or strange. These multiple – and, in many cases, contradictory – pressures upon fiction networks force them to forge new relationships with time; they may rest neither in the dynamic present nor the absolute past, and they must reconcile ahistorical adventure time with an emerging state of historicity. This tension can help to explain the uneasiness or ambiguity many fiction networks perform with respect to time. Comic book universes, once content to eschew the dynamism and inconclusiveness of the present in favor of a static, "oneiric" past, have over time allowed both a novelistic approach to time and a polyglot accommodation of creative voices to affect the narrative's ongoing progress: this, as we will see in the next chapter, has forced crises and discontinuities in the narrative, fissures the narrative must tear and then cover over in order to give a character like Superman both the complexity of a novelistic life and the stability or stasis of a epic hero – or a modern brand.

Other fiction networks, perhaps in anticipation of such crises, operate within fundamental ambiguities of time. *The Matrix* posits that the "present" we perceive as

[15] As described in "The *Bildungsroman"* (Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays 10-16).

dynamic is actually a simulation which persists statically hundreds of years into an apocalyptic future; *The Matrix Reloaded* then problematizes the narrative at a second level, suggesting that the apocalyptic future itself is an iterative simulation. By making time neither closed, nor dynamically present, but rather indistinct and mysterious, *The Matrix* creates a structure of time and space that allows the narrative to change – or remain static – as needed, by decoupling it from the rules of present or past time. *Star Wars*, on the other hand, lives in a space closer to epic, and seems to invoke an absolute past – "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away" – but diverges by populating that past with a detailed and growing five thousand year history. *Star Wars* avoids some of the problems of the encroaching dynamism of the present by making backward progress, by beginning at an endpoint – the "New Hope" cycle, the first film trilogy – and then gradually uncovering the mysterious events that preceded it. However, *Star Wars* expands its universe beyond this endpoint, and also views the past not as a closed and fully understood heritage but as an undiscovered frontier than can be mined indefinitely. Our pleasure in *Star Wars* lies less in iterative retellings and more in watching causal relationships unfold in a gradual expansion both into the "past" and the "future" as points on a continuum extending in both directions from "A New Hope." Though *Star Wars* and other networks invoke a distant past, and incorporate mock-epic genres in a simulation of epic, the touch points are not culturally internalized pasts or times of national myth. Rather, they are systems of time internal to the networks themselves, which may be manipulated individually or opened to indeterminacy as the creators see fit. These systems of time are further deformed when the story is transposed across heterogeneous forms; as we will see later in the study, the translation of *Star Wars* into the persistent world game *Star Wars Galaxies*, though presented as a process of transparent temporal synchronicity, has provoked fundamental questions of time and

causality in the coordinated "Expanded Universe." In the end, each fiction network must individually come to terms with the open question of its own time and progress, and must function in proximity to and contemporaneity with *itself* as an open persistent fiction. Again, this is not to say that fiction networks are fundamentally indeterminate; rather, they must negotiate stasis or formulae, and change or novelty, constantly, and must continually generate new ways to manage this seemingly unmanageable opposition. This narrative management is a prosaic, discursive process which informs the artifacts generated within the network. Though the fiction network complicates genre beyond the realm of language and speech, it does share a key quality with the novel: the meaning of a given fiction network as a genre is an evolutionary thing, and the genres situated within the network are destabilized by their placement in an evolutionary system.

READING THE FICTION NETWORK

Again, an operative term for fiction networks is *expansion*, or *scale*. The corpus of a fiction network is too large and dispersed for a reader to possess in its entirety. In the case of a comics universe, comics have been published periodically for years, and only a fraction of them are ever reprinted. There are hundreds if not thousands of comics which are either lost to a reading public or so rare and expensive that general access is impossible. In the case of a persistent world game, there is no physical text to access, only a real-time process of story-making that continues as long as its server host is active. Thousands of people are creating each moment, and those moments are lost even as they are created.

Fiction networks tend to generate mechanisms to compensate for this: they commonly have "stories of the story" that encapsulate the overall progress of the network. In persistent world games, "lore," both official and player-generated, that

inform a persistent world game's space through narrative; in comics universe, similar retellings and mythologies summarize the system as a fiction. These stories contribute to the practice I term *continuity*, the construction of a coherent narrative that structures meaning from the inevitably incoherent network. But these histories are *themselves* fictions, or mythologies; they are not the literal tales of what has happened across the expanse over time, but rather artifices, theories given story form with the goal of arguing for a particular interpretation of the shape of the network. I will later investigate some of these mythologies and discuss how they impact the network and one another, but, presently, suffice it to say that even the "maps" of fiction networks are sites of tension and negotiation, and that even the best map or history is not so much embraced by the network's community as "true" but rather understood as exigent for a particular time and context.

Needless to say, terms and techniques of close or authoritative reading become less useful when there is no authoritative copy of a work, where even the maps of the work are contested sites. Beyond this are questions of form: the operations of a massively multiplayer game involve practices of reading and writing, but these are not the primary operations for deriving or generating meaning in a networked, immersive, graphics-driven game system. Given the impossibility of "authoritative reading" in the context of networks, our methods of "mastery" in literary scholarship are radically challenged. As genres, fiction networks are traditions that are informed and changed by dialogue and the subsequent generation of artifacts within them. Again, scale is an operative factor – in many ways, the primary operative factor – in this evolutionary process. The fictional space of the network exceeds any of the forms that represent it; in addition, the physical corpus of the fiction network, in its scope and multiplicity, commonly exceeds any complete reading or systemic mastery. The fiction network can,

then, be seen as logistically polyglot: it must accommodate many voices, because no single voice could possibly sustain it. This scale, however, does not only inform the growth of the fiction network but also the critical processes of reading and interpreting it.

Current scholars in "video game studies" have proposed different views on what constitutes scholarly "mastery" of a game; Gonzalo Frasca suggests the study of "simulation rhetoric," a reading of a game that analyzes its various algorithms and rule structures (Frasca), while Espen Aarseth identifies gameplay mastery as a prerequisite for critical mastery (Aarseth, "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis"), but there is not yet anything resembling a consensus, and similar issues are at play in comics universes and multiple-media universes. While in a persistent world game these provocative issues of complexity and scale are inherent in the design, and are operative pressures as soon as it is created, these issues can emerge in other networks not only by design but by textual accumulation. The case of Henry Darger hints at some of these critical issues of scale posed even by a more conventionally "textual" large-scale form. Though Darger, as a solitary artist, did not create within the media landscape that generates fiction networks, he created texts that possess some analogous properties and present analogous questions. Most importantly for this analysis, his respected, if controversial, *art brut* work has received significant textual and formal analysis; consequently, his critics have had to directly confront the issues of textual scale in a way that, for instance, a cultural critic studying popular entertainment could successfully avoid by focusing on contextual patterns of production and reception. Darger was a recluse who, from 1909 to 1973, output over 23,000 single-spaced pages of fiction, including a 15,000 page illustrated novel titled *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion* (McNett).

> The story recounts the wars between nations on an enormous and unnamed planet, of which Earth is a moon. The confict is provoked by the Glandelinians, who practice child enslavement. After hundreds of ferocious battles, the good Christian nation of Abbiennia forces the 'haughty' Glandelinians to give up their barbarous ways. The heroines of Darger's history are the seven Vivian sisters, Abbiennian princesses. They are aided in their struggles by a panoply of heroes, who are sometimes the author's alter-egos. The battles are full of vivid incident: charging armies, ominous captures, alarms and explosions, the appearances of demons and dragons. (Prokopoff 3-4)

Darger's work lacks the multiplicity of voice, the social nature of the fiction network; the Realms of the Unreal were obsessively constructed for him and him alone. However, he constructed a fictional space with a similar scope, persistence, and regular presence in his life: "Darger made a conscious decision that, if the real world were not good enough, he would invent a different one, populate it with characters based loosely upon people he knew or read about, and then enter this world himself" (Bonesteel 7). Thus, while Darger's work differs in origin from the fiction networks I am describing, it also resembles them in significant ways. Perhaps most telling is Michel Thevoz' description of the work as an "epic comic strip" (Thevoz 16). Like the comics universes mentioned before, *In The Realms of the Unreal* uses fantastic modes of narrative to tell a sweeping, multiform tale. *In The Realms of the Unreal* in its scope incorporates not only multiple semiotic genres (collage-inspired painting, which has enjoyed the most critical focus, as well as verbal narrative), but also multiple genres of narrative:

> Typically, each volume exhibits sudden and abrupt changes in subject matter from section to section. Dull lists of battles or long passages of gray prose suddenly end, followed by chapters that sparkle with humorous dialogue, bristle with ripping adventures, or swoon with heartsick and erotic tenderness, before ultimately plunging into gruesome and sadistic scenes of brutality. Then the cycle begins all over again. (Bonesteel 25)

Though the narrative returns again and again to recurrent scenes or themes, this recurrence acts only as part of the whole, an *idée fixe* around which a variety of genres

can be added. This parallels the cyclic but evolutionary nature of the fiction network, built upon recurrent cardinal functions, but free to grow through the incorporation of diverse genres.

Most importantly, Darger's work – and the problems it presents to a critic – illustrates by analogy the challenges in bringing critical methods of close textual reading common in literary studies to a fiction network. Indeed, in works of a certain scale, even more aerial methods of study are difficult: as Michael Bonesteel posits, "one reason why Darger was not immediately hailed as a significant artist was the very nature of his voluminous output and the problem of how to classify it" (Bonesteel 15). The conclusions retold here are all incomplete inasmuch as they are based on a partial reading of Henry Darger's work. No one, save Darger himself, has completed a physical reading of *In the Realms of the Unreal*. John MacGregor, generally considered the foremost Darger scholar, claims to have read about a third of Darger's corpus: "Actually, not even MacGregor has read more than a representative fraction of Darger's writing, and it's safe to say that nobody ever will" (McNett). In the wake of such a daunting proposition, our current paradigms of textual criticism might encourage us to abandon such a large-scale work, or to choose to contextualize it culturally, rather than directly confronting its vast textuality.

This daunting issue of scale, if not of narrative persistence, also presents itself in Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards de poemes*, a "founding text" of the experimental Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle (Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort 147). *Cent Mille Milliards* is a series of 10 sonnets that

> constitute a combinatory ensemble: each line of each poem may replace (or be replaced by) its homologue in the nine other poems. Thus, to each of the ten first lines, the reader can add any of ten different second lines; there exist therefore 10^2, or one hundred possible combinations for the first two lines. Given that the

> sonnet has fourteen lines, the possibilities offered by the collection as a whole are of the order of 10^{14}, or one hundred trillion sonnets. (Motte 3)

Unlike *In the Realms of the Unreal,* one can safely conclude that *Cent Mille Milliards* was composed with an understanding – and appreciation – of the critical problems its textuality would create:

> … like a hulking iceberg, the *Cent Mille Milliards de poemes* manifests only a fraction of its bulk. Its reader can accede to a certain number of derived sonnets (the quantity depending on the degree of the reader's initiative, or perhaps on the depth of his or her monomania); turning to mathematics, the reader can determine their exact number. But it is obvious that even in a lifetime of diligent reading, one can read only a small portion of the sonnets theoretically engendered by the combinatory mechanism: *ars longa, vita brevis.* The rest remain in the *potential* state, and this fact, more than anything else accounts for the status of the text within the Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle. (Motte 4)

The *Cent Mille Milliards* is, by design, impossible to completely read; its potential meanings mathematically overwhelm its literal meanings. As a large-scale textual machine, it demands to be read not only on the level of its literal poetics, but also systemically. Though the state of the *Cent Mille Milliards* as text-generator is by design, and reflective of artistic purposes, consider it in relation to DC Comics, Inc., an organization that generates over 50 comics periodicals a month, which, at over 20 pages a comic book, results in more than 1,000 pages of comics alone, each month, most of which extend the "DC Universe" as an intertext. The "DC Universe" is, by virtue of its operations in the market, a generative textual machine, and can be read systemically as well, as a matrix of operational parameters and historical developments that inform both the meanings of its aggregate textual output and the individual artifacts it generates.

While the *Cent Mille Milliards* revels in its inaccessible scale, fictions manifested in large-scale forms have an interest in making themselves legible as stories, and employ structural and generic techniques to maintain accessibility. *In The Realms of the Unreal*

as a structure manages its own scale by building a foundation of simple forms, rules and conflicts, and then repeating them obsessively:

> After summarizing the entire saga within the first few pages, Darger spends the remaining fifteen thousand pages describing numerous battles in encyclopedic detail, ushering in dozens of main characters, and recounting countless adventures. There is really no plot, only a succession of battles, ripping yarns, talky interludes, descriptions of cataclysms, ad infinitum. (Bonesteel 19)

The obsessively cyclic nature of the work, with its inevitable return to brutal conflict[16], could be read as loosely analogous to the common action of many popular large-scale narratives. Though they do not present visions of sadism, narratives from *The Iliad* and other epics to fiction networks – *Star Wars, EverQuest*, the whole of the DC Universe – build their large-scale progress upon component cycles of agonistic conflict, often violent. By building a foundation of iterative, simple, primal narrative elements, these fiction networks sustain a point of entry from which complexity can build. This, again, suggests the potential of a systemic reading, one which studies the rule structures that undergird a fiction network and prevent it from collapsing upon itself.

In addition to reading internal systems of scale management, one can also consider algorithmic or distributed reading, and their implications for methodological approaches to large-scale text. The Oulipan Centre Pompidou experiment strove to "establish a basis for a possible agreement between computer science and literary creation" by introducing software to manage the complexity of large-scale textual systems, through random generations of instances from the *Cent Mille Milliards* and through the automation of play in Queneau's multilinear story "A Story as You Like It"

[16] The focus on sadism in *In The Realms of the Unreal,* beside Darger's unusual amount of output, might lead the reader to suspect his rationality. Bonesteel goes so far as to suggest that Darger suffered some sort of personality disorder, and that the text manifests the polyvocality of a fragmented psyche. Darger was, indeed, institutionalized at points during his childhood, and both his text and his life suggest a personality that was, at best, troubled, and, at worst, dangerous. A deeper psychological analysis of Darger's work is beyond the scope of this study, but such an analysis can be found in John MacGregor's *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal*.

(Motte). The Centre Pompidou experiment presents a liminal space between reading and gaming as operations, and hints at the potential for methods of literary experimentation in both fields of activity, whether facilitating the generation of meaning from large-scale fiction through "ergodic discourse" or resituating the literary output generated from an act of gameplay. It also suggests algorithms as a way of managing the impossibility of reading by employing "objective" or automated processes to analyze something beyond the capacities of any one subject.

These ideas of distributed and algorithmic reading suggest the practices of hypertext studies, or, perhaps more accurately, suggest "cybertextual" studies as outlined by Espen Aarseth. The fiction network can be read as a text as well, in what Aarseth calls a "topological" view of a text:

> Without too much discordance, I hope, the textonomical version of topology may be described as "the study of the ways in which the various sections of a text are connected, disregarding the physical properties of the channel (paper, stone, electromagnetic, and so on), by means of which the text is transmitted. (Aarseth, "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory" 60)

Obviously, some artifacts or nodes of a fiction network can be read and analyzed closely. This process only reflects criticism of the artifact, not the network. Alternatively, the "system" and its rules can be analyzed, as in "simulation-rhetorical" analysis, or a randomizing system can be used as a tool for analytical and generative approaches, as in the Centre Pompidou experiment. However, both these approaches seem to elide the interpretive or receptive processes, reducing a textual machine to its mechanical operations and losing the acts of communication or creativity that emerge from these operations. Given the partiality of all these approaches, it seems preferable, as I suggest at the beginning of this work, to integrate or triangulate them, to mix methods in hopes of adequately describing behaviors that often reside on the boundaries of existing disciplines and approaches.

Finally, these approaches must, I believe, be further supplemented by cultural criticism and histories of reception. Particularly in the cases of persistent world games and comics universes, issues of complexity and scale are managed continually through interpretive, ergodic, and social processes by the communities that receive and interact with them. These processes generate their own texts, and these networks are described and represented in countless "second-level" artifacts – Internet message board posts; Web log commentaries; Web maps, encyclopedias, and histories. In the genre ecology enabled by the Internet, one can and should study the system through artifacts of use generated by the system's community makes of it, the textual output of reception: once, as de Certeau and Jenkins rightly noted, invisible or marginalized, but now accessible globally, and given an amplified presence that demands accounting. These communities can now publicize, and coalesce around, artifacts and boundary objects that represent their reading and reworking processes.

My approach in the upcoming chapters incorporates elements of all these practices in hopes of attempting new methods of criticism that account for the divergences and critical issues of these forms while holding on to the spirit of literary study as a discipline. As time passes, models of production evolve, and computer technologies of storage, processing, and bandwidth grow more powerful; our popular fictions will continue to mutate and grow. Fiction networks present a landscape where reading is redefined, and authority is relative; however, these landscapes are informed by the history and practice of literature, and literary studies as a discipline can bring an understanding to these landscapes that other disciplines cannot. At the same time, the tools of textual and literary study must adapt to these environments, which confound traditional approaches. Among its other goals, this study attempts to present new methodological approaches for new forms of fiction through the use of heterogeneous

methods, including close reading, “simulation-rhetorical” analysis, and “second-level” historiography.

Chapter 3: Crises in the Comics Universe

> Recently, because of the computer, certain types of nonlinear texts have received attention from educational, technological, and theoretical circles. Now may be the time to broaden the scope of interest and to examine textual nonlinearity from a general point of view. (Aarseth, "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory" 51)

Just as Espen Aarseth has convincingly argued that textual nonlinearity and interactivity, while made more visible by digital technologies, are not intrinsically dependent on these technologies, I wish to again assert that the behaviors of fiction networking are not necessarily coupled to any one medium or technology of representation or social communication. New technologies and new practices of mass media make the emergence of persistent, connected, large-scale fiction networks more likely. However, these practices are not *necessary* for the generation of such a network. North American superhero comic book serials[17], analog monthly periodicals, began displaying complex intertextuality, emergent textual scale and behavior, and distributed authorship years before Internet technologies were popularized or even invented. These large-scale, multichannel serials, or "universes," are some of the most mature examples of mass-market fiction networking, and their characteristics – behaviors they manifest, pressures they must negotiate, management practices they perform – while different in many ways from newer, more nascent types of fiction networks, can shed light on the challenges inherent in the growth of all of them.

This chapter focuses primarily on the DC Comics universe: the intertextual, "macro-fictional" structure that encompasses most of the comic books, and other entertainment properties, published by DC Comics, Inc, a subsidiary of Time Warner,

[17] Please note the specific geographic, cultural, and market context of "comics universes": North American, European and Japanese comics traditions each have notably complex structures, but the popular traditions of European comics and manga have characteristics and behaviors quite different from the ones this rubric attempts to delineate.

Inc. DC Comics, originally known as National Periodical Publications, has been publishing ongoing serials featuring Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman, The Flash, Green Lantern, and other superhero properties for nearly 70 years. In that time, the family of monthly serials they publish has increased in complexity and connectivity and has emerged as an example of what I describe as a fiction network.

Comics universes operate under several formative pressures that inform the progress and evolution of their narratives. Beyond the task of maintaining a working interdependence between the monthly serials that extend the network's narrative and a compelling forward progress in each serial, the creators of the network must maintain the brand equity of the properties represented in that narrative; even as the characters evolve, the demands of branding and licensing demand that they maintain a marketable degree of stasis. Immediately, one can see that these pressures stand in contradiction: Superman must make progress in time to hold the attention of an existing audience, but he must also maintain stasis in time in order to remain accessible to new audiences. Superman, though serial and persistent, is fundamentally discontinuous and subject to reiteration – that is, his story occasionally refreshes from an origin state to remain legible to an outside reader. The comics universe is thus at once both fixed and, in Morson and Emerson's definition, prosaic; the network must, on some level, acknowledge its messiness. In other terms, a superhero must assert a plausible definitionality – a rationality of character – while at the same time conceding its nature, to paraphrase Jim Collins, as encyclopedic:

> The significance of the superhero can be ascertained, to borrow a phrase from A.J. Greimas, only in terms of an encyclopedia rather than a dictionary, as an assemblage of intertextual representations rather than a set definition. The simultaneity of the array, then, produces a form of narrative which is itself an array of narrative and visual codes that tells the story of the superheroes, but also tells in the process the history of their cultural significance. (Collins 180)

At once, there exists both a complex cultural intertext and the daily business of maintaining a large-scale, multichannel serial, of making this complexity rational; the intertextual and multilinear must be digested and represented as textual and linear. This is done through consensus acceptance of a contingent reading of the narrative as a whole. *Continuity* is the term used within the production and reception of comics universes to indicate the tenuous balance struck among all these pressures within the narrative: it is the optic by which the network "makes sense" historically. In *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, Richard Reynolds reads "continuity" in many aspects of the comics universe as a form, textual, intertextual and metatextual alike, and describes something like the continuity I describe here as an "ideal DC or Marvel metatext," which, he argues, is, due to the serial nature of the comics universe, never complete (Reynolds 43). However, the continuity I describe here stems from different conclusions about the nature of the comics universe. Reynolds describes the "metatext" as "a summation of all existing texts plus all the gaps which those texts have left unspecified" (Reynolds 43). This is partially true, but I would argue that continuity is more than a summation that resolves inconsistencies to produce an "ideal" reading; rather, continuity is born from a system that has inherent and unresolvable contradictions, and is an ongoing process of negotiation. Continuity is a socially-approved collective fiction, a community construct, a historical reading brought to a narrative whose logic is systemically discontinuous. Continuity validates or valorizes given artifacts or sites of narrative progress, resituates or rereads others, and ignores or disavows still others in order to assemble a working model of the comics universe as a tradition, a point from which subsequent production can grow. Given the fundamental contradictions inherent in the comics universe, continuity is also always partial, inadequate, and in flux.

Continuity manifests itself both within and without the representational space. Comic book companies often brand comics as officially continuous or discontinuous, as when some superhero comic books proclaim themselves "imaginary stories." "Imaginary" here denotes not fictionality (all stories in the universe, to paraphrase writer Alan Moore, are obviously fictional) but rather a state of unreality within the rules of continuity: it is "imaginary" because it does not have consequence or connection within the network. Reading communities can likewise declare a story, or series of stories, "imaginary" or spurious; though DC Comics has a great deal of influence in maintaining its continuity, readers can, and have, rejected claims of continuity they consider implausible or beyond the tacitly agreed-upon possibilities of the representational space.

Within the serial narrative itself, continuity manifests itself in mythologies. *Mythology* here is a representation or symbolic retelling of the narrative history of a fiction network. In comics universes, it can take the form of local narratives: the origin stories of heroes are told in serials, then later modified and retold as needed to maintain continuity. Since the 1980s, however, mythology has often been encapsulated in large-scale "events," individual serials which present histories of the entire space represented and, through the common superhero practice of agonistic conflict, present dynamic arguments of what continuity is and is not. While mythology in a fiction network cannot be said to have a privileged truth-value, as myth does in Pavel's *Fictional Worlds*, the function it performs in the comics universe is similar:

> Myths, being narratives, are composed of chains of events; by virtue of their privileged ontology, they serve as models of intelligibility for events in the profane world... as paradigms of sense they furnish explanations for profane events. (Pavel 131-2)

Mythology has a relationship of utility to the overall fiction. The mythology of any fiction network does not try to meticulously distill the past serial development of the

narrative, as that expansive and persistent development eventually renders the network incapable of logical or unitary narrative representation. Rather, the mythology of a fiction network, as an aspect of continuity, provides a working model for the understanding of subsequent artifacts.

CROSSOVER

In comics universes, mythology describes not only the history of the serials but of their connections as well; a comics universe, like any network, is given meaning not by its nodes but by the connections between them. In the sphere of comic book production and reception, the intertextual connection between points in the fiction network – which, in the case of comics universes, are most commonly serials – is generally referred to as *crossover*. Crossover is an evolving principle – it is more complex a mechanism now than it was decades ago, and it is likely to change in the future – and it has developed in tandem with the tradition of superhero comic books. Crossover as a plot device originated not long after Superman's debut in 1938; in late 1940, National Periodical responded to fans' desires to see heroes interact or "team up" by creating the Justice Society of America in *All-Star Comics* #3. *All-Star Comics*, as a "team book," was a space where the Justice Society, heroes with their own serials, could coexist. Although early stories of the Justice Society were little more than a series of solo hero adventures framed by cursory meetings—the heroes would join together to identify a conflict, then split up to do their own legwork in discrete seven-page stories—it represented a trend that would quickly render porous the boundaries between superhero texts[18]. In time, this

[18] Notably, this original moment of crossover in comics also presented the first shift in superhero stories from the episodic to the truly serial: "*All Star Comics* was also one of the first publications to foreshadow coming adventures. Toward the end of the first installment, the Flash dashes to Washington at the urging of the 'FBI Director.' He returns with word that the FBI needs the JSA's help. The team would reconvene

juxtaposition became less a novelty and more an operating principle of shared fictional space from which all the comic books of National Periodical (who later took on their current name, DC Comics, Inc.) emerged. The comic book plots of the 1930s-1950s, where superheroes participated in repetitive, contained episodes with no hint of cause and effect, gave way over time to the concept of the "universe," an ongoing, overarching plot structure with an increasing sense of historical time and causality; though the system depended globally on a degree of stasis and constancy, the serials in the short term grew gradually more causal, progressive, and consequential. As I have mentioned previously, this incorporation is incomplete: the comics universe has over time, taken on some of what Bakhtin calls "historic time," but still retains much of the ahistorical "adventure time" that characterized early superhero comics and their precursors in the revived romance. In this, as in many other ways, the DC Universe maintains a fundamental strangeness with regards to diegetic time.

The "DC Universe," then, is an emergent structure; the initial parameters of National Periodical Publications – parallel and ongoing serial adventures, produced by a variety of writers and artists for hire – resulted, over time, in unpredicted behaviors, specifically intertextual connectivity and a slowly encroaching sense of narrative history and causality. In the 1960s, when Marvel Enterprises, Inc. began publishing what is now recognized as their "stable" of brands (among them Spider-Man, the X-Men, the Hulk, Daredevil, and the Fantastic Four), they embraced these behaviors – the "universe" – as a concept *ab ovo*, placing all their characters and plots in the same fictional world. Even in DC's case, where a looser association between comics later became a coordinated network, the "universe" is a retroactive story structure, which imposes a continuity upon

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in the capital the following Tuesday—in the following issue" (Greenberger, *Millennium Edition: All Star Comics #3*).

all the episodic comic books published before as well as after the universe's advent. The principles of crossover and of the universe do not only envelop the superhero comic books generated by the publishers, but all genres published by them: Superman lives in the same fictional space as the hard-nosed, realistic WWII hero Sgt. Rock, who lives in the same fictional space as the horror character Swamp Thing, and the Western gunslingers Bat Lash and Jonah Hex. In Marvel Comics, the 1960s romantic heroine Patsy Walker becomes the 1970s supernatural superhero Hellcat. Bakhtin's theories of dialogue in works such as "The Problem of Speech Genres" located dialogic action on a linguistic level; the novel generates meaning through the interplay of languages and voices (Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays). The comics universe, on the other hand, generates heteroglossia through the juxtaposition of its topical genres: aggregates of verbal, visual, and historical information, whose boundaries are defined but always open, interact with each other and co-evolve within the space of the universe.

Beyond the juxtaposition possible among relatively distinct narrative spaces (Superman meets Swamp Thing), crossover as a concept has grown to allow for something subtler and perhaps more provocative: dialogue among multiple fragments of a single fictional space as it both changes over time and as it replicates into new versions across multiple artifacts. Crossover has allowed multiple serials to engage in dialogue with each other in the compositional process of the universe, but it has also allowed the universe as a system to engage in intertextual and metatextual dialogue with its own history. This dialogue, often, enacts not only a connection between fictions – past and present moments in the narrative come into dialogue with one another – but a juxtaposition of a narrative with its material history: as these points come together, the formal presence of comic books is given a representational presence as well.

COMICS REPRESENTING COMICS

Why does this happen? Why does crossover not only connect disparate narratives but, at the same time, frequently engage in metatextual play with its own material presence? Why are superhero comic books so commonly represented in superhero fictions? There are multiple possible interpretations of this phenomenon: one can posit that comics as a semiotic system lends itself to an awareness of its own materiality or media. Comics are a hybrid form: they juxtapose verbal and visual semiosis on an equivalent representational frame, and in that hybridity, they arguably expose the artificiality of both. George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, which ran as a newspaper strip from 1910 to 1944, has been widely noted as a pioneer of this semiotic play, "a masterpiece of its genre, manipulating the twin symbol systems of language and pictures in such a way as to invalidate both" (Shannon 209). Edward A. Shannon notes that, in this dual invalidation, an early postmodern or metatextual milieu emerges:

> In *Krazy Kat* there is no "truth" other than that which Herriman's characters create for themselves, violating not only the rules of science and nature, as many comic heroes do, but also violating the linchpins which hold together the very form in which they are created, often mockingly commenting on the constraints of these conventions – a sort of metacomics – within the strip itself. (Shannon 213)

Comics as a duel of sign-systems always has a subversive state of what Bolter and Grusin call hypermediacy; comics remind us through this semiotic juxtaposition that it, like all semiotic systems, mediates rather than creating immediate experiences of reality. *Krazy Kat* extends this subversion and generates, in its milieu of Coconino County, an ongoing world that flouts the idea that it represents anything other than itself. *Krazy Kat* can be seen as the beginning of a tradition in comics where metatextual play, rather than dispelling the comfortable illusion of immediacy in comics, instead builds on an awareness of mediation which is always present.

Beyond the semiosis of comics skillfully played with in the strip *Krazy Kat*, there is the materiality and relative isolation of the comic book in particular, which carries with it social associations that inform its generic conventions:

> Comic strips, like the movies, were a public and ceremonial form. They were part of the larger experience of the newspaper, integrated into a ribbon of wars and sports and society. They had a place in a hierarchy. A comic book, on the other hand, was something you had to walk into a store and buy; it was in its very nature outside parental control – and it had overtones, always, of the secretive, the menacing, and the faintly masturbatory. That familiar scene of twentieth-century life – the twelve-year old raptly absorbed in some pop-culture narcotic – first appeared with the comic book. The comic book supposed, as a condition for its existence, the fragmentation of the genuinely mass or folk audience that had embraced the comic strip. (Varnedoe and Gopnik 182)

The comic book thus has some relevant distinctions in comparison to the comic strip. Varnedoe's quote implies that the comic book's materiality has a distinct and perhaps debased affect: it is something of a fetish object, and its material representation within comic books could, then, be read as an appeal to that fetishism. However, Varnedoe's quote also asserts that the comic book caters to a smaller and arguably more "inside" audience, a readership with an assumed consequent familiarity with the form beyond the casual. This implication speaks to the comic book as a medium around which a interest community coalesces; this coalescence of a community enables what Henry Jenkins calls the "particular set of critical and interpretive practices" he associates with fandom (Jenkins, Textual Poachers 278). In the case of comics universes, these "critical and interpretive practices" involve the active reading of the serials over time, with an eye toward making sense of their discontinuities; this active reading is a key mechanism by which the persistent narrative makes sense. The representation of the comic book's materiality within itself, then, can be read as an acknowledgement of the universe's – or network's – dependency on the community's engaged reading of it over time. In *The Mirror in the Text,* Lucien Dallenbach uses the term "aporetic duplication" to describe

such an example of *mise en abyme* or mirroring in a text: "a sequence that is supposed to enclose the work that encloses it" (Dallenbach 36). Fictional *mise en abyme* as Dallenbach discusses it provides the reader a legible indicator of the text's enclosing or more complex structures:

> …the transition from the story being told to its reflexion implies two different operations as far as transformational logic is concerned; a *reduction* (or structuring by embedding), and an elaboration of the referential paradigm (or structuring by projecting a metaphorical 'equivalent' on to the syntagmatic axis). (Dallenbach 56)

Because, in comics universes, seriality is not linear or simple – because the narrative is subject to contradictions, discontinuities, and the long-term vicissitudes of production – considerable contextual knowledge on the part of the reader is often necessary to make sense of the text. In a network where individual artifacts are dispersed, and scale and complexity are impediments to simple reading, the nature of the connection between the artifact and the network must be symbolized or explained, and the importance of the reader's ongoing participation in this process must likewise be represented. In this case, references to the material history of the network, like the mythologies of the network, can act as signposts that explain the shape of the network as a history of production, and highlight the continuities – of brand, of meta-narrative, of community interpretation – that the producers want to preserve if and when a narrative discontinuity or moment of play is introduced.

This foregrounding therefore speaks to an endemic porosity between fiction and the process of fiction-making. The comics universe is an open system; its persistence and multiple authorship result in a simultaneity of production, narration, and reception. Consequently, the clear and distinct stages of a non-persistent or non-serial closed narrative – a novel is completed, then read, then commented upon – are disrupted by a simultaneity between a narrative and its process. This disruption gives production a

narrative presence in itself, and we can follow the progress of the network's creation as we do the narratives created:

> Creators would often become part of the narrative. [Stan] Lee and Jack Kirby's conspicuous appearance on the cover of the tenth issue of *Fantastic Four* became an event. The copy reads, "In this epic issue: surprise follows surprise as you actually meet LEE and KIRBY in the story!!" (Pustz 48)

This awareness and representation of narrative-in-production, which I would argue is an inevitability in any fiction network, is a frequent motif in superhero comics. In Collins' analysis of *Batman* and other comics, he notes

> The juxtaposition of different media underscores the inseparability of the action from its codified representation; it acknowledges, very explicitly, the complexity of current popular culture in which the negotiation of the array (of the "already said") forms an essential part of the "action" of the narrative for both author and audience. (Collins 166)

> …texts now evidence a highly sophisticated understanding of their semiotic environments, thereby collapsing the moments of production and eventual circulation so that the former appears inseparable from the latter. (Collins 177)

I must add that this juxtaposition not only mixes and reworks Eco's "already said" into new hybrid forms; it also incorporates "how it has been said" into the form. The fiction network builds on reiterations, on the productive recombination of consistent cardinal functions with narrative innovations. Its mythology suggests a continuity and shape to the network by privileging not only fictional "truths" but specific instantiations or iterations of those truths into artifacts. This recurring reference to materiality not only reflects cultural trends but serves systemic functions, including the reconciliation of an ever-present process of production and reception with the fiction it generates.

Finally, like any signifier in a postmodern context, this foregrounding of textuality can represent the artificiality of any representation. Once these material signposts are established in comics, they become detached from their signified – they grow in sophistication, and in the hands of the right creators, become tools for

intertextual and metatextual arguments about the nature of the network as a system. This play is especially meaningful in a system like the comics universe, where not only the relationship of signification but the relationship of author to utterance is detached. In these corporate systems, the original creator of a hero, event, or statement is destined to become decoupled from it as it enters the proprietary ecology. In this space, the text is primarily a product in a market, and its consequent emphasis not as linguistic act but as material product seems appropriate.

FLASH OF TWO WORLDS

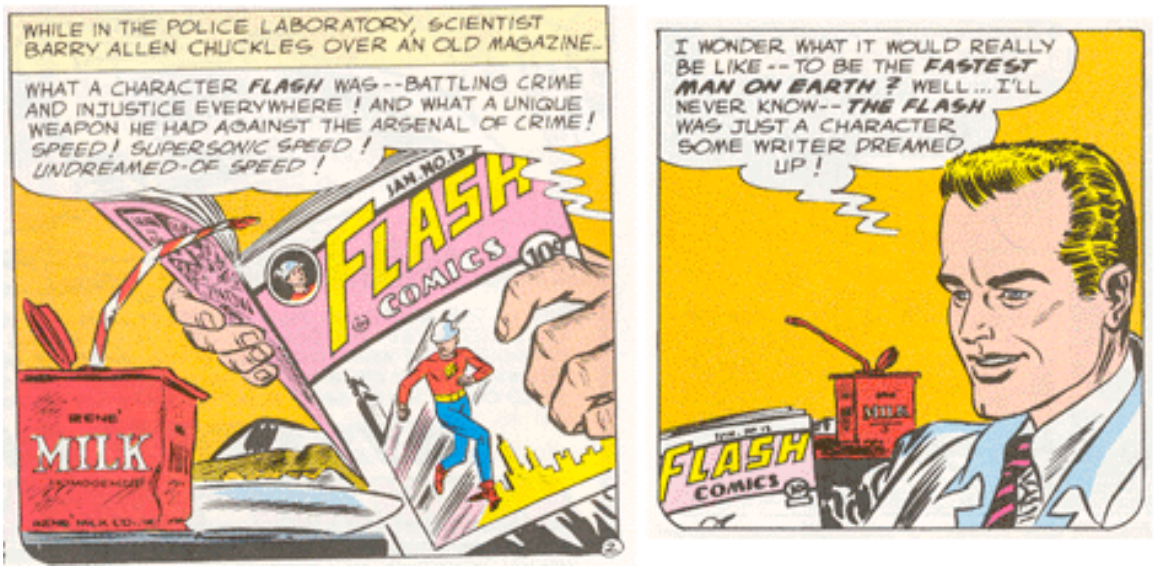
In the case of the DC Universe, both cross-narrative and material self-reflexivity can be seen emerging in the late 1950s, at the very inception of the "Silver Age" of comics:

> Starting in 1956, the Flash and other characters received updated costumes and enemies, while the new Green Lantern and Hawkman, among others, had origins rooted in science rather than magic. Reviving these old names in new heroes attracted a new generation of readers ready for the adventures of superheroes while establishing a sense of continuity with the fans of the original versions, who were beginning to establish the new comics fandom. (Pustz 43)

The success of these heroes relied on a combination of compelling novelty and brand recognition: the stories "started over" and diverged significantly from the stories of years past, but they also shared significant similarities, and they communicated both a narrative and textual lineage with stories past.

In 1956, DC presented the first of these Silver Age revisions of their superhero characters: Barry Allen, a.k.a. the Flash, who made his first appearance in *Showcase* #4's "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt," written by Robert Kanigher and drawn by Carmine Infantino and Joe Kubert. Barry Allen's origin is largely standard fare: a police criminologist, he gains unearthly speed powers after being accidentally showered by

lightning-charged chemicals. The presentation of his story, however, establishes that his "origin" is not only the beginning of a new narrative but a continuation of a the history of the fiction network, both as a narrative and as a history of textual production and reception. The story metatextually communicates its seriality and an understanding of its position within a representational history.



From "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt" (Kanigher, Infantino and Kubert 2)

On page 2, panel 6 of "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt," we are introduced to Barry Allen as a pair of hands reading a comic book: as an old copy of *Flash Comics* (an actual comic book published in the 1940s by National Periodical, DC's corporate antecedent) takes up the foreground, we read a word balloon (originating off-panel) saying, "What a character Flash was—battling crime and injustice everywhere! And what a unique weapon he had against the arsenal of crime! Speed! Supersonic speed! Undreamed-of speed!" (Kanigher, Infantino and Kubert 2). The next panel pans out, and

the top of the *Flash Comics* issue shares space with Barry Allen, who says: "I wonder what it would really be like—to be the fastest man on earth? Well... I'll never know—The Flash was just a character some writer dreamed up!" (Kanigher, Infantino and Kubert 2). The story of the Silver Age Flash is, then, at its outset a dialogue between a narrative space – the fictional world of Barry Allen – and a text, *Flash Comics*, which occurs in both that space and in the reader's reality: an emblem of the universe not as a simple continuing narrative but a serial dialogue involving both things represented and their representations. If we consider the questions raised in Chapter 2 about fictional distance – what is the proper place of distance in the reading of a fiction? How are the boundaries between spheres of different truth-value negotiated? – we see that this origin story encourages a reading of itself as a point of ontological fusion: the reader is encouraged to understand, at once, both the sphere of fiction and the sphere of fiction-making that contains it, and to accommodate a degree of porosity between the two spheres. From this point, it takes all of three panels to begin breaking through the boundary separating the sphere of Barry Allen's narrative and the sphere of the network; Barry Allen is promptly transformed, and "The Flash" ascends from the status of "a character some writer dreamed up" to that of protagonist.

From "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt" (Kanigher, Infantino and Kubert 1)

The ongoing story of the Flash, then, is established from the onset as a story of ontological fusion – a place of oscillation between the story and the informative materiality of the story. Barry Allen not only continues the legacy of the Flash but the legacy of *Flash comic books*. Even before the story begins, the splash page of *Showcase* #4 depicts the new Flash exploding from the pages of a text that, though called "Flash Comics," is clearly a reproduction of *Showcase* #4 itself. The first page, meant to visually introduce this new Flash to his audience, immediately introduces him in terms of a "crossing over" from the textualized level of "Flash Comics" to a "more real" and present level of representation. The splash page is therefore a presentation of the movement of the origin in visual shorthand; it suggests that this is never only the story of a superhero speedster but always also a meta-story of comic books over time, and that the position of the Flash within the spheres of story and meta-story is to be understood by the

reader as somewhat fluid. It encourages a productive ambiguity between the world represented and the process of representing it: it not only reminds the reader of the materiality of the fiction network – its persistent openness, its potential multilinearity – but implies that Barry Allen himself – a comic book superhero who himself reads comics, who bursts from the printed comics page to a representational sphere above it – somehow has his own degree of readerly agency.

This agency soon allowed new levels of connection; in Gardner Fox's story "Flash of Two Worlds" published in September 1961, Barry Allen actually meets the "character some writer dreamed up," as Barry Allen "crosses over" into the world of Jay Garrick, the first Flash. Like "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt," "Flash of Two Worlds" establishes distinct spheres of meaning in the fiction network – a space of the present narrative, and a space of material, textual representations within it – and then blurs the boundaries within those spheres. In the story, Barry Allen, performing a magic trick for children, suddenly finds himself transported, and muses "I could have vibrated so swiftly that I passed through some sort of space-warp!" (Fox et al. 68) Before long, Allen realizes that he is in Keystone City, home of a being he always believed fictional: Jay Garrick, the original Flash. He quickly finds Garrick's home and presents the situation to his precursor, first puzzling Garrick with a comprehensive knowledge of his history (which Allen knows from diligent reading of *Flash Comics*) and then explaining his hypothesis:

> [Allen] You were once well-known in my world – as a fictional character appearing in a magazine called *Flash Comics*! When I was a youngster – you were my favorite hero! A writer named *Gardner Fox* wrote about your adventures – which he claimed came to him in dreams!
>
> Obviously, when *Fox* was asleep, his mind was "tuned in" on your vibratory Earth! That explains how he "dreamed up" *The Flash*! The magazine was discontinued in 1949!

[Garrick] Amazing! That's the very year I – *The Flash* – retired… (Fox et al. 73)

By explaining that DC's 1940's world of heroes, perceived by both Barry Allen and us as text, is to Barry actually another dimension, an equally viable reality separated by cosmic frequency which would come to be known as "Earth-2," the DC Universe connects years of history to the network; the discontinuous serial history of DC Comics, fractured in order to successfully revivify the product line, is reunified by fantastic sleight-of-hand. Earth-2 shows that, in comics, nothing need necessarily remain "just text." Instead of relating to past superheroes through nostalgia or allusion, with a clear hierarchy of representation and reference, the superhero comic book creates a space where everything can be represented in simultaneity. By not only bringing Jay Garrick and Barry Allen together in the narrative but situating this union as a destabilization of Garrick's previously-closed serial history – by "cracking open the books" and connecting them materially as well as narratively – "Flash of Two Worlds" not only connects two serials but establishes them as always already having been connected. "Flash of Two Worlds" emphasizes the importance – indeed, the ongoing operative presence – of the serial history of The Flash; it not only places the narrative within a history but throws the present and its history into ongoing and immediate dialogue. It celebrates the systemic and dialogic possibilities inherent in a fantastic or marvelous perspective on space and time.

FUNCTIONAL UNREALITIES

Comics universes are markedly unreal: this is doubtless an issue of little dispute. *How* they are unreal, however, requires further detail, especially given previous discussions of unrealistic genres in narrative theory. In *The Fantastic: A Structural*

Approach to a Literary Genre, Tzvetan Todorov distinguishes multiple genres which incorporate the supernatural or the unreal; he defines the fantastic as "that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event," the stuff of ghost stories, or of the Gothic (Todorov 25). The fantastic is a liminal genre, or a genre in superposition; it makes meaning in an indeterminacy, the state of a supernatural element not yet explained. It resolves, in Todorov's analysis, to one of two concluding genres: the *uncanny*, where the laws of reality can explain the supernatural element, or the *marvelous*, where the laws of reality are revised or amended to accommodate it (Todorov 41).

The superhero as a figure is a fantastic one, and his origin is that of the world outside our window becoming unreal: the alien landing in Kansas, the bookworm turned web-swinger by a chance spider bite, the police criminologist and comic book fan transformed by a lightning bolt. There are regular attempts to make superhero origins plausible as extensions of our lived experience: real stories of genetic modification and radioactivity lead to the conceptualization of, most aptly, the Uncanny X-Men. But these origins push the boundaries of plausibility – when employed, they fit the mold of science fiction as Todorov describes it (Todorov 56) – and the superhero tends to exist as an irreconcilably fantastic creature: living as a part of a world that supposedly mirrors our own, but contradicting its physics. This tenuous, unresolved state makes itself manifest in absences or artificial limitations: the traditional superhero can stop bank robbers but not effect social change, can travel through time but cannot cure cancer.

As the comics universe suspends the fantastic over the course of years, it does not resolve but rather erodes the reality that supposedly mirrors our own; the world does not become unproblematically marvelous – it continues to pretend (often half-heartedly or ironically, but nonetheless) that its truth-value approaches reality – but the preponderance

of fantastic, unreal elements within it make its resolution to the uncanny clearly implausible. In the case of "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt," the power of the fantastic has been restored through an explicit discontinuity, the relegation of the original Flash to a textual space within the fiction of Barry Allen. By the time the Flashes meet in "Flash of Two Worlds," the milieu has moments of tongue-in-cheek realism – when arriving on Earth-2, Barry Allen looks up Jay Garrick's address in a phone book – but the space is clearly marvelous, if awkwardly so. Indeed, it is an escalation of the fantastic into new realms of marvel: Barry Allen transitions from speedster to dimensional traveler, and learns that a textual world is real to him. As the universe ages, the need for ongoing novelty causes such moments to repeat; the fantastic is absorbed into the universe as a fictional space and accommodated through a revised physics, just in time for new, fantastic elements to shock our heroes once more.

The presence of fantastic elements within fiction tends to make that fiction fraught in terms of its cultural reception: with a few notable exceptions, such as within the topical genre of magic realism, the fantastic in fiction is associated with low culture, with the trappings of childhood, with an inability to distinguish real experience from fictional experience, and with a perspective far more naïve than the perspective supposedly brought to the novel and to realism. The popularity of the fantastic and marvelous among mass media fictions, which have their own ideological trappings and associations, strengthens this association between unreal realms and conceptual or aesthetic inferiority. This cultural perception of the fantastic or marvelous is not entirely unwarranted; there is much fantastic fiction that can be fairly evaluated as unsophisticated or ill-executed, and I certainly do not wish to imply that comics universes (or other fiction networks) are free of bad artifacts, fantastic or otherwise. A system as multivocal and widespread as any fiction network will inevitably generate aesthetically

poor or mediocre artifacts. However, these systems can also generate aesthetically remarkable, even unprecedented artifacts, and they often do so through a prudent manipulation of the fantastic and the marvelous as modes of narrative.

Fantastic elements serve particularly useful textual functions in fiction networks. Realism limits narrative opportunities to a set circumscribed by the laws of physics; realism presupposes a linearity and regularity of space and time, and, beyond this, a continuity or rationality of character and context, a relative unity of topical genre, a limited if detailed sphere of inquiry. By freeing itself from realism – or, more accurately, by deprioritizing it and situating it as one of many topical genres that can be mobilized – comics universes and other fiction networks can mitigate inevitable problems of space and time. Unconstrained by realism, a fiction network can explain the discontinuities and multiplicities inevitable in a narrative system characterized by both consistent branded narremes and widespread, multichannel polyvocality. Most importantly to the DC Universe, a fiction network unconstrained by realism allows a realm of intertextual play disallowed by a representation of time and space as linear. A fiction network that indulges in the fantastic allows the opportunity for ongoing dialogue with itself, with its own history. "Infinite Earths" and time-travel as motifs allow writers, potentially, to place any two moments of the network's corpus into juxtaposition.

CO-EVOLUTION OF UNIVERSES: CONTINUITY AND CAUSALITY

Contemporary with the "Silver Age" progress of the Flash and of the DC Universe was the debut of what is now described as the Marvel Universe, created largely (but not entirely) by writer Stan Lee and artists Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko[19].

[19] Like any such network, the Marvel Universe has struggled with issues of authorship and intellectual property ownership, and the legitimacy of its various creators is an ongoing issue of critical – and legal – debate. Pustz presents a representative statement: "Although the creation of characters such as Spider-

> Marvel realism also involved the company's reliance on continuity, on how the stories about the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, and all the rest fit into a single narrative that had a past, present, and future. By the 1970s Marvel was publishing comics set in all three of these periods, requiring fans have knowledge of hundreds of years of events to completely appreciate the Marvel universe and its continuity-based realism. (Pustz 52)

"Realism" is, as one might expect, a tenuous signifier here; I doubt any critic, including Pustz, would argue that the physics of any superhero comics universe approaches realism. However, whether we accept "realism" as an appropriate term for the representational innovations brought about in comics by Marvel or not, Pustz is correct in noting those innovations. "Marvel realism" here speaks to the introduction within the genre of superhero comics of characteristics more associated with Bakhtin's description of the novel: an increased focus on social and psychological complexity, an attempt to enforce temporally linear narrative, the introduction of time and consequence into a formerly rather uncomplicated oneiric and temporally playful environment. While the DC Universe of "Flash of Two Worlds" was content to play in the potentials of the fantastic, developing meta-motifs to defy the rules of space and time, the Marvel Universe made a concrete goal of reconciling fantastic elements with novelistic understandings of space and time within a network recognizable to the modern reader – a network with clear allegiances to the novel or romance.

From this period until the present, Marvel and DC have engaged in a mutually informative co-evolution. They are – in the corporate, social, and narrative senses – separate entities or networks, yet the boundaries between them are as porous as those between any two corporations in the same industry, who are prone to sharing a labor pool, a consumer base, and a market. This porosity has exposed itself in partnerships and

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Man and the Fantastic Four is a matter of intense dispute among comics fans and scholars, most would agree that Lee was the central figure in the creation of the Marvel philosophy, much in the same way that Hugh Hefner was the central figure in the creation of *Playboy*" (Pustz 49)".

cross-company "crossover" artifacts, from *Superman vs. Spider-Man* to a short-term promotional mixing of the two universes into an "Amalgam Universe." However, the more routine – and more influential – aspect of this porosity occurs on the level of human resources and their intellectual output. Artists, writers and editors routinely move between the two companies as creators-for-hire, and seed the distinct networks with similar concepts. Thus, the two networks respond to the same trends, strive to match one another's innovations, and co-develop as separate but closely allied networks-as-genres. According to Stan Lee in an October 2003 lecture, the first modern Marvel comic book, *The Fantastic Four*, was commissioned because Lee's publisher played a game of golf with the publisher of National Periodical/DC, who bragged about DC's new "team book" *Justice League of America*; in response, Lee's boss called for his own team book in order to compete (Lee).

The tables quickly turned, as the popular "Marvel realist" style moved DC toward a similar approach to their universe. In the 1980s, this was accelerated by business decisions made by the comic book industry to scale back on newsstand sales and sell directly to comic book specialty shops:

> The rise of the direct market for comics in the 1980s has helped to remove them (comic books) from the daily lives of most Americans by taking comics out of drugstores and off newsstands. As a result, some Americans are probably only dimly aware that comic books still exist, let alone continue to represent an industry worth hundreds of millions of dollars per year. For fans, though, the direct market and the specialty shops brought comic books to a central location where devoted readers could find all the titles they wanted. It also helped to facilitate the growth of alternative comics and the increase in adult comic readership. (Pustz 209)

This change in the sales channel for comics further transformed the composition of its reading community; just as a transition from comic strips to comic books creates a smaller, more devoted, more critically engaged audience, the transition from the public

newsstand to the specialty shop implies a further concentration: a wider array of readers became a far smaller, but far more devoted, group of fans. This self-selecting and coherent community could give the large-scale narrative the devoted reading it needed to grow to new levels of complexity and intricacy. Continuity as collective memory became larger, more complex, and more valuable.

> In some ways, continuity has become the planned obsolescence of comics in the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1940s, comics would become obsolete as they were read repeatedly and eventually simply disintegrated. Readers would simply go to the corner newsstand or drugstore and buy a new comic. In recent years, though, readers have protected and preserved their comics so that they are no longer ephemera. But to insure that new issues are purchased, publishers have emphasized the importance of readers buying every issue. With each new issue, continuity is theoretically revised, making previous stories important as history but obsolete as contemporary guides to a superhero universe. Devoted readers do not want to miss a piece of the continuity puzzle. (Pustz 132)

"Marvel realism" suited this model well. DC, however, had to reconcile the new trends Marvel represented with their decades of accrued narrative, which was immersed in playful, fantastic modes of narrative. DC moved toward the novelistic, causal and continuous but lagged behind Marvel.

WATCHMEN AND CHRONOTOPIC CHANGE IN THE DC UNIVERSE

DC made up this lag in the mid-1980s with the publication of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*, both "limited series" (four issues and twelve, respectively) that were quickly collected into "graphic novel" compendia. Both works were marketed for "mature audiences"; both presented a far darker tone than was common in DC Comics serials, and both displayed a sophistication and self-awareness in their approaches to the superhero and to the superhero serial as genres. I would disagree somewhat with Collins' assertion that these

works represent the first "extension of the spatial and temporal dimensions of the narrative well beyond the 'action' of the diegesis" (Collins 172), or that they hold a unique position in comics in demonstrating that "to envision textual space is to envision at the same time the cultural space surrounding it" (Collins 172). From "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt" to the comic (within comic book narrative, and within the mode of comedy) depictions of Lee and Kirby within the pages of *Fantastic Four*, comics have demonstrated a nascent understanding of their cultural and material contexts for decades. However, *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns* did display an unprecedented self-awareness: they explored the traditions of superhero comics as a genre and presented nuanced consciousness both of comics as semiosis and of superhero comics as a material tradition, as Collins has convincingly argued. The position within the comics universe of *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* is a complex one: in the social understandings of continuity they are understood both as separate things and as objects immensely influential upon comics universes as traditions. A reading of *Watchmen* will hopefully clarify this.

Watchmen is the story of a group of heroes (but, crucially, not a "team" of heroes; their relationships are less rigid, more psychologically and historically complex) facing a dystopic and darkly psychologized representation of the United States in the late 1980s. *Watchmen* was originally intended to feature the superhero characters of Charlton Comics, a smaller comics company whose intellectual property had been bought by DC, but editorial concerns moved Moore and Gibbons to mask the characters within new pseudonyms and representations. This departure from a publishing history allowed Moore to generate a history in toto, and he does: *Watchmen* is a DC Comics superhero story that explicitly resides outside of DC Comics' continuity.

Collins and others have noted, rightly, that *Watchmen* is an exercise in collage, or intertextuality, or what, in this analysis' framework, would be called a mixing of semiotic genres. Each chapter of *Watchmen* contains at its end a series of *verite* "clippings":

> These inserts include extracts from the published memoirs of a superhero, academic studies on the significance of superheroes and vigilantism, fan letters to superheroes, and letters from a superhero to his employees regarding the successful marketing of himself and his colleagues as Fully Posable Action Figures. (Collins 177)

These clippings establish a history and context for the events that occur in the main narrative of *Watchmen*. However, this main narrative itself coexists as comics with a second narrative:

> Beginning in Chapter [III], *Tales of the Black Freighter,* a comic from [*Watchmen'*s diegetic] early sixties is introduced into the narrative of *Watchmen.* It begins rather simply as a comic-within-a-comic conceit, with a young man reading this comic as he sits next to the newsstand operator. After the initial establishing shots of this figure reading the comic, with the rolled "parchment" text panel from *Freighter* appearing over his image as a kind of misplaced "voice-over" narration, an over-the-shoulder shot shows the actual pages from the comic he reads, then gives way to actual panels from "*Freighter,"* now inserted within the grid, replacing the *Watchmen* images, and then set in varying patterns of alteration throughout the next three chapters [and beyond, to Chapter XI], the movement between the two narratives usually accomplished through "graphic matches" (nearly identical compositions with character substitutions). The intertextual frame could hardly be more explicit, *Freighter* becoming quite literally an intertext of *Watchmen*, with its images interrelated on a frame-by-frame basis, enjoying the same visual status as the *Watchmen* narrative. (Collins 176)

*Watchmen'*s juxtaposition of its main narrative, its secondary narrative (*Freighter*), and its fictionalized material context is formative, and handled with remarkable sophistication. This collage of modes and narrative threads, brought together to present a whole, is reminiscent of secondary speech genres as presented by Bakhtin:

> Secondary (complex) speech genres – novels, dramas, all kinds of scientific research, major genres of commentary, and so forth – arise in more complex and comparatively highly developed and organized cultural communication… During

> the process of their formation, they absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres that have taken form in unmediated speech communication. (Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays 62)

Again, Bakhtin's topic is *speech* genres, and analogies to the visual-verbal operations of comics and specifically of *Watchmen* must be cautiously drawn. But analogies here are productive; Moore and Gibbons absorb and digest newspaper communications, sales documents, autobiography, "research" and "commentary," and even a second genre of comics narrative into the whole of their structure. Importantly, though, *Watchmen* subordinates these semiotic and topical genres to a larger whole within its structure, in a way reminiscent of the subordination of primary speech genres within the novel in Bakhtin's analysis:

> These primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones. They lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterances of others… They enter into actual reality only via the novel as a whole, that is, as a literary-artistic event and not as everyday life. (Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays 62)

The clippings of *Watchmen* construct a history of the diegesis, one which generates a sense of historical context, but is entirely enclosed within the text:

> *Watchmen* presents not only a highly sophisticated rearticulation of superhero narrative, but a fully fictionalized set of encrustations that constitute the actual "text" of *Watchmen*, which consists of the comic panels, but also the various forms of discourse which it either generates and/or circulates through. (Collins 177)

The clippings evoke our material and cultural history of superhero comics reception, but in an abstract, not literal, system of reference: allusion rather than crossover. The intertext of *Watchmen* serves the unity of *Watchmen* as a structure that is inviolate, and that presents a chronotope which represents a coherent history beholden to realism; while it is formally provocative, its mechanisms of collage and mise en abyme do not impact the world represented in the way that the mise en abyme of *Flash Comics* impacts the

world of Barry Allen. The Watchmen are *not* the heroes of Charlton Comics, themselves literally "digested" within the structure of the DC Universe. *Tales of the Black Freighter* is *not* a real comic book, and its diegesis is not juxtaposed with the diegesis of superheroes, a phenomenon we *do* see in the comics universe (as I will later describe). *Watchmen* presents a world of superheroes and their material and cultural history "as a literary-artistic event," and as a self-contained work has the luxury of organizing its multiple genres with a centripetal impetus. The comics universe, on the other hand, must deal with the multiple genres at play in its structure "as everyday life," and must paradoxically deploy the mechanisms of the fantastic to accommodate these profoundly centrifugal operations. *Watchmen* operates from a position of critique above – and outside – the DC Comics universe; it interrogates superhero *comic books*, but not the superhero *comics universe* as a persistent system where material history is "digested" within the diegesis itself, and interrogations spawn from – and exist in an ecology with – the form they interrogate.

I do not intend to minimize the importance or aesthetic power of *Watchmen* here, merely to situate it as a form that operates outside the "comics universe" as a phenomenon. *Watchmen*'s position – evocative of the discourses it critiques, but not networked with them – grants it a legibility that the artifacts of a fiction network can lack for a reader outside the system, and allows it to generate, with a critical perspective, a novelistic commentary on superheroes as a genre and superhero comic books as a cultural and literary form. In *Watchmen*, "various forms of discourse" are represented in the fiction, but are not worked through *by* the fiction; though the text of *Watchmen* is multimodal, the narrative in which the characters exist is more linear and naturalistic than "Marvel realism" could ever hope to be, and "comic panels" are subordinate in an hierarchy of representation that separates the narrative from its textuality and clearly

privileges the metanarrative as the reader can perceive it. Only one character in *Watchmen* – the quantum-powered Doctor Manhattan, the omnipotent result of a catastrophic atomic accident – perceives the world of *Watchmen* as a fantastic hero would:

> [Dr. Manhattan] Time is *simultaneous*, an intricately structured *jewel* that humans insist on viewing one edge at a *time*, when the whole *design* is visible in every *facet*. (Moore and Gibbons 9.6)

Another possible metaphor besides "time is a jewel" is "time is *comics*," or, as Scott McCloud puts it, "space does for comics what time does for film" (McCloud 7). Spatial juxtaposition replaces temporal linearity for Manhattan, and he perceives time simultaneously and multilinearly. Manhattan's fantastic ability to "read" the world of *Watchmen* as we – or Barry Allen – would makes him a tragic outsider, a cosmic loner whose omniscience drives him away from Earth. Dr. Manhattan is a character from a fiction network placed inside the world of a "graphic novel," but his chronotope is clearly marked as unfit for the world which he inhabits.

Graphic novel as a term has been used so widely as to become nearly insignificant: in current parlance, any square-bound book employing the semiosis of comics can be called a graphic novel. When it was first popularized, though, during the publication of *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns*, it carried with it very specific inferences which were fairly radical within the history of DC Comics. No longer content to play catch-up with "Marvel realism," DC presented these graphic novels as an appeal to a mature outside audience, and as a new approach to how a comics narrative should be represented. Frank Miller, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons presented reactions to the traditions of superheroes and comics universes, concepts they considered stagnant; these reactions involved viewing superhero icons through the lens of novelistic and filmic realism. In conjunction with this, DC marketed both texts outside the commonplace

world of their persistent monthly comics: though they were originally serialized, both – particularly *Dark Knight Returns* – were also marketed in bookstores, outside the low-culture locus of the newsstand or the insularity of the direct market.

> *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, both excellent works, take much of their influence from film and from fictional modes of "realism"; they attempt to make the superhero psychologically and socially comprehensible and provocative to a point of view outside of comic books, and for this reason they found praise from readers outside of the increasingly closed and coded world of comics fandom. (Craft)

Watchmen and *The Dark Knight Returns* fit within a new direction in the marketing of DC Comics, developed in tandem with corporate preparation for Tim Burton's movie version of *Batman*:

> The mid-1980s marked the beginning of a process in which WCI (Warner Communications, Inc.) both tested the waters and began building towards the release of *Batman*. By issuing *The Dark Knight Returns* in comic form, WCI essentially test marketed a dark reinterpretation of Batman with an adult readership whose experience with the character would include the camp crusader of the 1960s. (Meehan 53)

The success of *The Dark Knight Returns* proved that this adult audience was ready to jettison their past understandings of Batman as a "camp crusader," and to privilege this new, self-contained "grim version" of Batman. However, such a shift proved more fraught within the open ecology of the DC Universe. The "two worlds" of the Flash introduced a formative principle to DC Comics: multiple and divergent earths, distinct but connected fictional spaces. The DC Universe made the most of this principle, using "multiple earths" to accommodate everything from story experiments to intellectual property acquisitions: by the mid-1980's. there were "on the order of two dozen Earths… discovered or described" within the structure of the DC Universe, or "multiverse" as it was commonly described. Barry Allen and Jay Garrick were not the only heroes to discover one another as doppelgangers; every hero, including the most prominent –

Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman – had more than one alternate iteration. It's easy to see how DC Comics, as a subsidiary of Warner Communications, could read this complexity as an obstacle to their business goals; multiple earths, laden with history, complicated the streamlining of Batman as grim avenger, and complicated the bringing in of new, older readers, who were presumably used to less complexity, more linear fictional worlds, and, presumably, the maturity of novelistic time and causality. DC therefore chose to

> …restructure it (the DC Universe) around a new organizing principle, specifically, the "adult ethos" Brooker mentions…, the very significant demographic shift that made the target audience of the comic book companies eighteen to twenty-four-year-old college-educated males. (Klock 21)

In order to actuate this change in the DC Universe, to make it univocal and therefore more marketable, DC Comics, Inc. launched a 12-issue, one-year serial event that would "crossover" into nearly all the serials published by the company at the time: the *Crisis on Infinite Earths,* which, according to its writer, Marv Wolfman, "existed in its pure form only to bring DC back to an easy-to-read beginning before endless continuity took over" (Wolfman et al. 6)

CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS

In *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, two ancient presences – the benevolent Monitor, and the destructive Anti-Monitor – struggle for the fate of the multiverse. The Anti-Monitor wields universe-destroying anti-matter, a wall of white that erases universe after universe until the superheroes of the "core" universes rise up to battle him. This initiates months of struggle, during which time becomes simultaneous – all eras past, present and future coexist at once – and hundreds of DC's heroic characters face death against an unfathomable foe. In the end – and thanks in large part to the self-sacrifice of Barry

Allen – the heroes defeat the Anti-Monitor through a retroactive integration of timelines and universes: a fusion of the multiple universes into one linear universe/timeline, and a fusion of divergent iterations of heroes into unitary, canonical versions. In addition, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* finished with a sense of systemic indeterminacy that allowed creators of individual serials to reimagine their characters with a clean slate; in the chaos that followed it, series such as John Byrne's *Superman: The Man of Steel*, Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli's *Batman: Year One* and George Perez' *Wonder Woman* locally reimagined icons whose historical baggage had, ostensibly, been wiped out in *Crisis'* global revision. Officially, the characters of the DC Universe have a vague or partial memory of *Crisis*; they know of it as an event, and remember some of its traumatic moments, but they do not, officially, know what their universe looked like before it, nor that their universe as it exists is a revision.

On its own merits, *Crisis* is not a compelling read. Its characters are not psychologically complex; the motives of the Anti-Monitor resemble those of, as *Watchmen'*s Ozymandias derisively and critically puts it, "a Republic serial villain" (Moore and Gibbons 11.27). It communicates drama not through human conflict but through ever-escalating spectacle. Dense and fully referential, it does not strive for closure, nor does it employ the novelistic conventions that a more commonly-studied text such as *Watchmen* employs. This is clear even from a surface reading of the page compositions in *Watchmen* and *Crisis*: *Watchmen* employs a strict and regular compositional grammar based upon nine-panel grids. Though *Crisis* is certainly not erratic in its composition, and reflects the craftsmanlike work of artist George Perez, it employs a far wider range of page compositions, and its panel-to-panel transitions are far more radical. In *Understanding Comics,* Scott McCloud presents six forms of transition between panels in comics, six types of image juxtaposition that, when presented as a

whole, communicate a progression of information to the reader. *Watchmen,* on the one hand, most often presents single-subject, action-to-action transitions and single-scene, subject-to-subject transitions; like a film, it finds a subject or space and holds focus on it, leading the reader to concentrate more substantially on character psychology or *mise en scene*. *Watchmen* does contain substantial juxtapositions of content: it weaves in the pirate narrative *Tales of the Black Freighter* with its primary narrative, and employs cross-cutting between scenes for thematic emphasis, but these are dramatic conventions familiar to viewers of film: they are the practices of montage, bringing to mind, among other analogues, the thematic juxtaposition of christening and assassination at the climax of *The Godfather*. When a scene transition is used in *Watchmen*, it is used to bring a closer focus on both scenes juxtaposed. This is not to say that *Watchmen* can be simply read as film: to again quote Collins,

> … such analogies are… potentially misleading, because they fail to do justice to the juxtaposition of the disparate images that appear within the single page or two page unit that constitutes the "tableaux" of the graphic novel. *Mise en scene* in film depends upon sequential replacement of one image with another, but the *mise en scene* of the comic depends upon simultaneous co-presence on the page. (Collins 173)

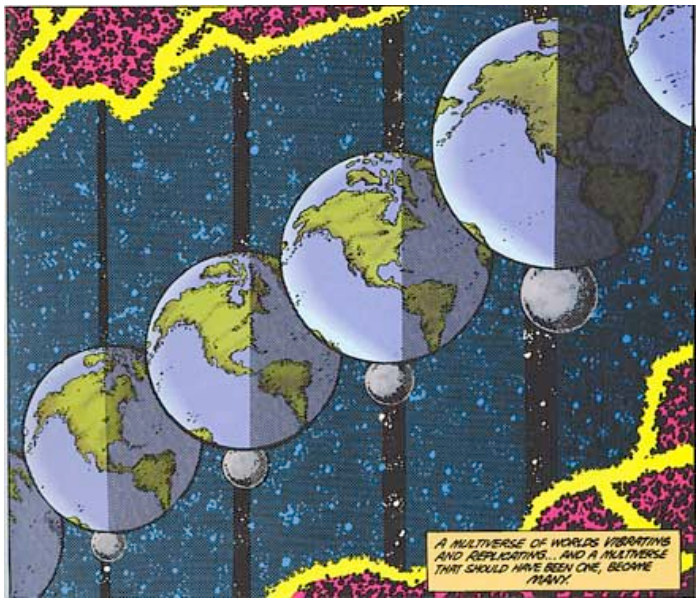
However, without oversimplifying to the conclusion "*Watchmen* is filmic comics," one can certainly argue that the panel regularity and conservative transitions of the work can be read as productively referencing filmic conventions within the semiosis of comics, just as Ang Lee referenced semiotic conventions of comics in his film *The Hulk*. This blending of systems, as we have noticed with *Krazy Kat*, can destabilize all semioses involved, but in *Watchmen* these filmic conventions make the form seem more natural, not less. Unlike *Krazy Kat*, whose semiotic play foregrounds its own unreality, the semiotic appropriations of *Watchmen* make the milieu less fantastic, less hypermediate and more immediate.

Crisis, on the other hand, avoids action-to-action transitions, presents subject-to-subject transitions as its most linear progression, and relies heavily on disparate scene-to-scene transitions, "which transport us across *significant distances* of *time* and *space*" (McCloud 71); the comics convey a jumping from point to point, from Atlantis to the 30th Century to the antimatter universe, from Earth-1 to Earth-2 to Earth-S. Perez packs each of these panels with detail and characters, and employs overlapping simultaneous panels, never allowing the eye to rest or meditate: there is too much information to convey to allow such indulgences. Transitions do not place focus on the local scenes juxtaposed, but on the grand, sweeping narrative that consumes them all.

The compositions of *Crisis* represent the complexity of a narrative that concerns a cast of thousands and is meant to occur at all points of the DC Universe, temporal and spatial, at once. To a reader with no background with the network from which it emerges, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* seems like an exercise in melodrama and encyclopedic incomprehensibility; it does not present the independence, critical distance, or cross-readership comprehensibility that distinguishes a work such as *Watchmen*. To a reader with a working knowledge of the network, however, *Crisis* is an indispensable and potent artifact: its semiotic density speaks to the powerful complexity and informational saturation that a persistent fiction network can achieve, and its melodrama bespeaks a systemic crisis of immense internal gravity; the human bathos arises from a systemic earthquake.

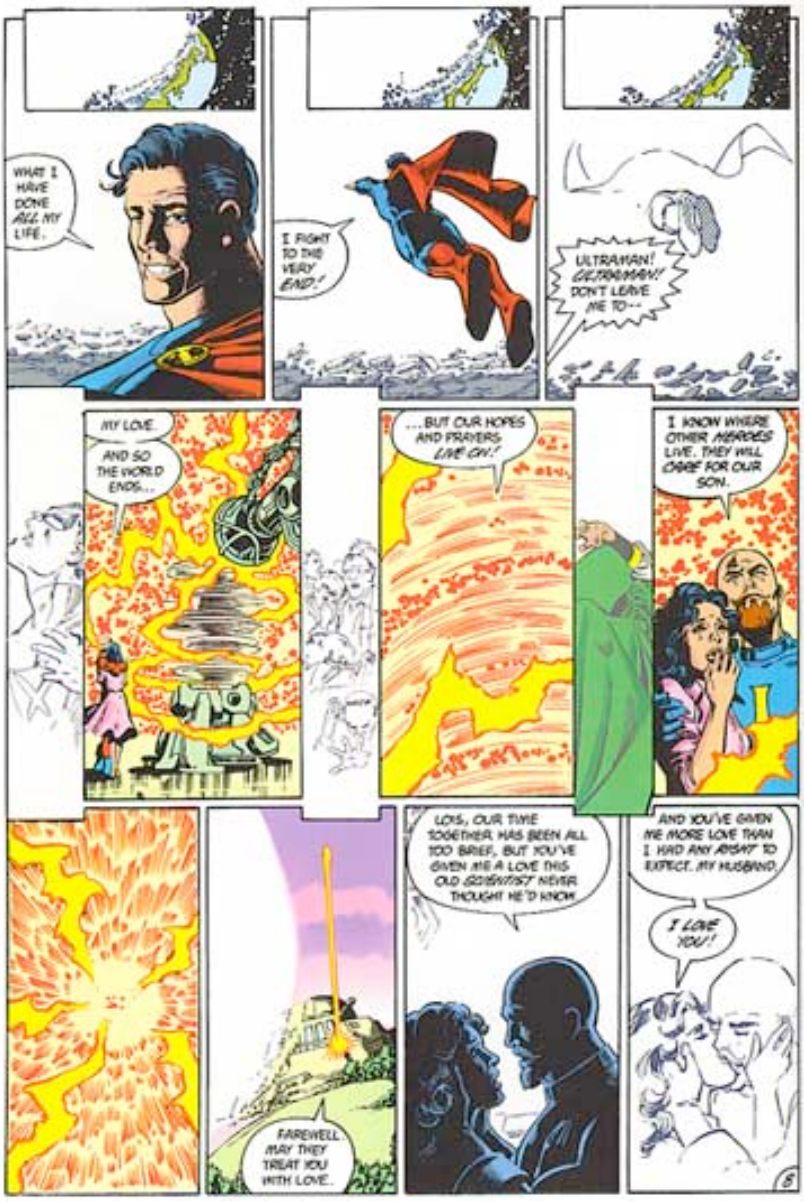
Crisis on Infinite Earths is a death ritual performed within the space of the fiction network. It is, remarkably enough, the most fully-realized example (as of that time) of the multivocal potential of the comics universe as a fiction network, crossing over more characters and more worlds than ever before, and with more consequence. Cowboys and space police, ancient magicians and World War 2 battalions, warriors of post-apocalyptic

dystopias and talking chimpanzees all appear, and, usually, they meet and engage in dialogue with one another. This kitchen-sink mixing of genres sounds more bizarre than dramatically compelling in description, and, particularly because of its deadpan presentation, it is also so in execution. However, what *Crisis* lacks in drama it supplements in spectacle and by example: it is not literary per se, but it is immensely valuable as a map of what the DC Universe had become, and what potential it held. Like the *Cent Mille Milliards*, it is an illustration of principles taken to a provocative conclusion; like the *Cent Mille Milliards*, its value lies as much in the questions it provokes as in the truth it presents. In this full-bore juxtaposition, this represented exposure of all points in the universe's multipath history, *Crisis* invites the reader to think globally about the DC Universe as a system. Dozens of panels in *Crisis* depict not heroes or combat but upon globes; frequently, the heroes stand above multiple interconnected Earths, moons, and universes, contemplating their fate.



From *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (Wolfman et al. 11)

The point of focus is on the network as a whole, on the array of global versions and their interactions. This is, indeed, the subject of the first page of the series: multiple iterations of Earth and its moon, juxtaposed with the caption "A multiverse of worlds vibrating and replicating… and a multiverse that should have been one, became many" (Wolfman et al. 11) At the same time as the narrative summarizes this multivocal system, however, it erases that multivocality by fiat; the second page of *Crisis* shows an unstoppable force destroying a universe and an Earth. This force is an encroaching whiteness, a "white energy that looked a lot like the blank page taking over" (Klock 21). This white energy is not only presented to us on an impersonal, cosmic level; we are shown cities, crowds of panicking people, children being erased.



From *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (Wolfman et al. 18)

As the series progresses, more and more universes are exposed to this erasure, including universes created on the spot only for the sake of erasure. By the end of *Crisis on Infinite Earths,* major characters have been killed, and others had been disavowed altogether,

presented as never having existed. Though it was intended to be an entertaining and organic evolution of the system into something simpler, in execution *Crisis* becomes a grand tragedy of the system, a work that exercises the potential of the network as a massive intertextual sphere even as it methodically shuts (or attempts to shut) that potential down. It becomes, as Grant Morrison calls it in his *Animal Man*, "the ending of time and space. The death of history" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 23).

REACTION TO *CRISIS*

Crisis partially, temporarily met its goal for the DC Universe: by disavowing multilinear interpretations of characters and, at the same time, years of previous serial narrative, it allowed artists and writers to create artifacts within a much more streamlined mythology. However, the short-term effects could not last: again, as an expanded and persistent fiction system, the DC Universe will always tend toward complexity, and that proved true in the later years following *Crisis*. As the streamlined post-Crisis universe gradually found itself again weighed down – and, worse, further complicated at points where the simplifying principles of *Crisis* were badly implemented in individual serials, such as *Hawkman* and *Legion of Super-Heroes* – the darker aspect of *Crisis*, its state as a systemic tragedy, grew in symbolic power. In the discourse of popular superhero comics, *Crisis* has become an emblem for catastrophic change and its repercussions. The comic book serial *Kurt Busiek's Astro City* presented an elegiac reference to it with the short, self-contained story "The Nearness of You," an homage to the *Crisis* set outside the fictional sphere of the DC Universe. In "The Nearness of You," Michael Tenicek, a decidedly non-superheroic character in a realist milieu, finds himself haunted by dreams and false memories of a "dream girl." Through the course of the story, he learns that this

"dream girl" was his wife, who – in the fallout of a cosmic upheaval clearly coded as a cosmic revision of the system, as *Crisis* – was revised out of existence. When presented with the option of forgetting his wife and the history that has been disavowed, he asks the supernatural agent of truth in the story – The Hanged Man – to allow him to keep the memories of a past now extinct. The Hanged Man commiserates, and says that, when given the choice, "No one forgets. No one" (Busiek 15).

As an "average guy" – single, white-collar, late 20s to early 30s – who demographically reflects many of the readers who would read the story, Tenicek presents a point of realistic rather than fantastic identification; instead of the "power fantasy" mode of identification attributed to common superhero comics, "The Nearness of You" invites the reader to identify on the level of lived experience. and consequently can symbolize the reader's reception of previous comics texts. Geoff Klock points out that Tenicek

> finds peace through understanding, not by forgetting, but through memory. "The Nearness of You" establishes, against the horror of mismatched continuity, its beauty and potentiality. (Klock 89)

The angst Tenicek experiences as a result of the "beauty and potential" presented and denied to him parallels an angst of readership generated through *Crisis*; the knowledge of countless narrative moments denied by the network that initially generated them. Tenicek here is emblematic of a sympathy between both reader and writer at this point: as evidenced by his active participation in fan communities, "Busiek clearly cares about what is going on in comics, much in the way a devoted fan would. Like many comic book professionals, Busiek is a fan" (Pustz 109). Here, Busiek presents an argument against forgetting, an argument to communally maintain the understanding of the network that *Crisis* disallowed.

CONSUMER, CREATOR

"The Nearness of You" bespeaks a complexity in the production of the fiction network that bears repeating. Though the corporation is the primary productive force – see our previous discussion, and Meehan – it is overly reductive to think of the corporation as a unitary agent, or to think that its power is absolute. A corporation is an organization of individuals with multiple agendas, who interact productively within the sphere of the organization; it is also an organization that responds to feedback regarding its progress and profitability. Thus it will respond to communal desires that have the potential to affect profit: in a system where both engagement of direct-market readers and expansion of a branded property across media are priorities, DC Comics, Inc. and Marvel Enterprises have a number of desires – some of which, predictably, contradict one another – to satisfy. This system of feedback must increasingly respond to coherent and vehement reader communities, which can coalesce around Internet communications and publishing technologies to organize those desires and to make them known.

In the case of comics universes, many of these fan communities "infiltrate" the corporation, inasmuch as their members become creators after considerable time spent as consumers, or as fans. Matthew Pustz describes the active fan participation of writers Roy Thomas (Pustz 46) and Kurt Busiek (Pustz 109) in particular, but it can be safely said that the majority of comic book creators today have personal histories as comic book fans. In a system where the persistent narrative grows under the watch of producers who were once consumers, past conflicts or points of difference between corporate and audience visions of the narrative can insinuate themselves into the narrative itself: "continuity" can be changed to satisfy the newly-amplified visions of fan-creators. Corporate creativity, individual creativity, and consumer response are therefore porous, intertwined and interdependent categories.

This nexus of productive categories manifests itself, among other things, in the phenomenon of "fan favorite" writers and artists in comics. At present, comics creators are well-known to the readers and carry with them their own brand equity and political capital. The success of *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* can be considered a contributing factor to this; the success of these "graphic novels" in the bookstore market gave that market a new significance, and the practices of that market – particularly the publicization of the named author – seem to have inspired a similar interest in marketable authors within the comics industry. Fan favorite Grant Morrison, like Alan Moore, was originally the writer of serials for British comics anthology *2000 AD* and for Marvel's UK division, and was hired by DC Comics at the same time as Neil Gaiman in what can be read as an attempt to duplicate success:

> In 1987, at the height of the critical acclaim for Alan Moore's work on *Swamp Thing* and *Watchmen*, DC Comics dispatched a band of troubleshooters on what is quaintly termed a 'headhunting mission' to the United Kingdom. The brief was to turn up the stones and see if there weren't any more cranky Brit authors who might be able to work wonders with some of the dusty old characters languishing in DC's back catalogue. (Morrison et al., Animal Man 3)

Neil Gaiman quickly began *Sandman*, an exploration of myth that, among other things, read the DC Universe as one tradition among many in a history of human mythology, folklore, and storytelling. Morrison's first serial work for DC was *Animal Man* (written by him and drawn primarily by penciller Chas Truog and inkers Doug Hazlewood and Mark Farmer[20]), *w*hich began as a fairly straightforward exploration of animal rights but

[20] Any work of comics criticism must acknowledge the complicated and group-oriented production of most mainstream comics. Grant Morrison is represented in this analysis as a primary voice because his general work in these groups has been established as strongly directive (see, among other sources, the published script to *New X-Men* issue 121 as evidence of his authorship not only of plot and dialogue but of panel compositions and transitions). However, and especially given the nature of fiction networking as I argue it, I must situate Morrison similarly to Drehli Robnik's situation of Spielberg: "My discussion of Spielbergian intelligence does not relate to a man/author but to a cinematically defined project recognizable in global mass culture by Spielberg's name" (Robnik). To mitigate the elisions inherent in this turn, I refer to Truog and Hazlewood or Farmer as possible in reading compositions, and emphasize the inherent complexity – and contingency – of attribution in this context.

quickly became something more: from the outset of his interaction with the DC Universe, Grant Morrison presented arguments for the restoration of multivocality in that fiction network.

GRANT MORRISON AND *ANIMAL MAN*

Animal Man is both a provocative vision of a character and a provocative perspective on the DC Universe, and on what both *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and ongoing trends in publishing meant to it as a fiction network. The "dusty old character" Morrison chose, Buddy Baker, "the man with the animal powers," first appeared in 1965, as the protagonist of a story in the serial *Strange Adventures*. *Strange Adventures,* importantly, was an anthology outside the superhero genre: its stories, from "I Became a Robot" (issue 164, May 1964) to "The Hand that Erased Earth" (issue 168, September 1964) generally resided firmly in the genre of classic science fiction. Buddy, however, became a recurring character in *Strange Adventures*, and was eventually colonized by the superhero genre, given a costume and a code name. Animal Man languished as a character of low popularity, with few subsequent appearances in the 20 years that followed. As a member of the "Forgotten Heroes," he participated in *Crisis*, and then found himself active in Morrison's imagination:

> I had no idea who I might dig up and revamp. On the Glasgow to London train, however, my feverishly overstressed brain at last lighted upon Animal Man. This minor character from the pages of *Strange Adventures* in the '60s had always, for heaven only knows what murky reasons, fascinated me and, as the train chugged through a picturesque landscape of Tudor houses and smiling bobbies on bicycles, I began to put together a scenario involving an out-of-work, married-with-children, third-rate super-hero who becomes involved with animal rights issues and finds his true vocation in life. (Morrison et al., Animal Man 3-4)

In *Animal Man* #5, "The Coyote Gospel," however, Morrison veers radically from this more straightforward animal rights message. Animal Man himself is only a marginal

figure in "The Coyote Gospel": the story's protagonist, Crafty Coyote, is the Looney Tunes character Wile E. Coyote, given bloody physicality within the "realistic" milieu of the post-*Crisis* DC Universe. Cursed to walk desert highways until he can deliver a message, trapped in an unending cycle of "terrible death and resurrection" (Morrison et al., Animal Man 131), Crafty is hunted by a truck driver, beset by tragedy, who believes him to be the devil.

When Animal Man finds Crafty in the desert, Crafty gives him a scroll, which communicates the eponymous gospel. We are presented a "funny animals" pastiche of *Looney Tunes* thus:

> No one in those days could remember a time when the world was free from strife. A time when beast was not set against beast in an endless round of *violence* and *cruelty*. (Morrison et al., Animal Man 127)

Crafty alone finds the self-knowledge to question this strife; he goes into the presence of God and, in exchange for "peace among the beasts," is sent into "the hell above… the dark hell of the *second reality*" and given "new *flesh* and new *blood*" (Morrison et al., Animal Man 129). In the "dark hell of the second reality," Crafty dreams of overthrowing the tyrant god, and of establishing a better world for his fellow animals and himself. Unfortunately, when Crafty shares the scroll, Animal Man is unable to read it, and the mute Crafty is finally killed by his hunter's silver bullet. As the story closes, the scene pans out: Crafty lies on a desert crossroads in a pose of crucifixion, while fingers and a brush from outside the panel – the artist-God, represented in the frame but exceeding it – colors in Crafty's last pool of blood (Morrison et al., Animal Man 130-33).

"The Coyote Gospel" is a radical departure from the previous issues of *Animal Man* and from the readings of the DC Universe prior to it: while *Crisis* functioned systemically, as a unaware if effective editing of the universe through melodrama, "The Coyote Gospel" begins Morrison's thinking about the DC Universe in not only global but

critical terms. Matthew Pustz argues that this thinking is typical metafiction, possibly interesting to comics fans but fairly mundane to a better-read audience familiar with practices of the postmodern novel:

> To be sure, readers with a broader understanding of contemporary literature might have seen *Animal Man* as a relatively simple exercise in postmodernism of the sort that had occurred decades earlier in traditional literature. Linda Hutcheon, for example, argues that the postmodern novel "begins by creating and entering a world… and then contesting it" – clearly what happens in the first twenty-six issues of *Animal Man*. Perhaps Morrison was merely trying to mimic what he had been reading in his favorite novels.
>
> Or perhaps he was trying to "explicitly [lay] bare the conventions of realism," a tactic that Patricia Waugh argues is central to metafiction. *Animal Man* may not be grounded in the kind of realism to which Waugh is accustomed, but the comic is certainly grounded in the peculiar realism of superhero comics, where reality is created out of continuity and specific formal rules. (Pustz 129)

While the term "Marvel realism," though not entirely accurate, sufficiently denotes an introduction of motifs associated with realism into a non-realistic tradition of superhero comics, here the coupling of "realism" with the representational rules found in comics universes unfortunately leads to a false comparison. Pavel's definition of realism is useful here:

> In a realist perspective, the criterion of the truth and falsity of a literary text and of its details is based upon the notion of possibility (and not only *logical* possibility) with respect to the actual world. Different kinds of realism vary, of course, according to the description of the actual world and to the definition of the relation *R* that connects this world to its possible alternatives. (Pavel 46)

As we will see later, Grant Morrison, for what I think are particular ends, performs in interviews and public statements an argument that the world represented in comics universes is more like actual experience than most people may think; however, there is still the matter of most people, for whom "the continuity and specific formal rules" of superhero comics are not only unrealistic but fundamentally divergent from the generic practices and perspectives embodied in conventional realist forms. The blurring of

conventional realism with the evolving conventions of comics universes under "realism" here leads to a blurring of Morrison's practices in *Animal Man* with metafictional turns in the novel, which, I would argue, shortchanges the history and particularities of the comics universe as a form, and misrepresents Morrison's goals. In *Animal Man,* Morrison does not create and enter a world and then contest it: he *inherits* a world, which he enters and then investigates and contests[21]. This investigation involves new explorations of a system that had already displayed – from "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt" to Stan Lee and Jack Kirby to *Watchmen* and *Crisis* – a high degree of comfort with metatextual play, albeit with varying degrees of self-awareness. Consider the echoes between "The Coyote Gospel" and motifs previously read in this chapter:

- "The Coyote Gospel" is a productive mixing of awkwardly but productively juxtaposed topical genres – funny animals, Gospels and Scripture, and post-*Crisis*, "mature" and novelistic comics.
- Crafty is a traveler who, through fantastic fiat, crosses textual spheres to engage in direct dialogue with a character from another textual sphere. Crucially, this dialogue is mediated through *comics*. Crafty's gospel is presented with a different panel border and a simpler line more appropriate to funny animal comics: it generates meaning through its hypermediacy.
- Crafty's tragedy lies in his story being disavowed by the master narrative; though he tries to communicate across spheres through the medium of comics, Animal

[21] To underscore the point, one need look no further than the appropriations other writers within the network made of *Animal Man*: After Morrison inserted himself into the series in order to have a dialogue with Buddy about the nature of the DC Universe, other writers decided Morrison as a character was fair game for other DC books. So, not long after, the serial *Suicide Squad* featured Grant Morrison as "The Writer": "The Writer was one of the members of the Suicide Squad that was assembled by Black Adam to attack Circe's island during the lamentable 'War of the Gods'. Apparently whatever he wrote (or in this case, typed into his laptop computer, which was suspended from a harness on his chest) happened. Unfortunately, shortly after the assault began, he got a case of 'writer's block' and got his throat ripped out by one of Circe's werebeasts" (Obscure Characters -- the Writer).

> Man can read only gibberish. It can be argued that Crafty's attempt at semiosis has been rendered illegible through the "realist" revisions in the network's continuity.

These are all, indeed, metafictional turns, but they are not simple appropriations of motifs in metafictional novels; they are self-aware reiterations of metafictional elements present in the network for decades. Superhero comics universes have generated, as Jim Collins remarks of *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*,

> a hyperconsciousness… a far more elaborate form of self-reflexivity than that which characterizes the meta-fictional texts of the sixties because it shifts the focus away from the agonies of personal expression, stressing instead the intertextual dimensions of both textual production and textual circulation. (Collins 177)

I would argue that *Animal Man*'s "hyperconsciousness" is even more focused on the peculiarities of textual production and reception as reflected in the DC Universe as a persistent large-scale structure. While *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* perform critical inquiry on the superhero as a character type and as a topical genre, *Animal Man* performs a critical inquiry on the DC Universe specifically as a fiction network, as a persistent system with its own states of internal dialogue or feedback, its own mechanisms for representing its history and complexity, its own potentiality for intertextual crossover, and its own physics. *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* both transplant icons from the comics universe into independent spaces or milieux (in *Watchmen*, a different fictional space altogether; in *Dark Knight Returns*, a non-canonical future) in order to elide some of the complexity of the network, its inherent chronotopic contradictions. They subordinate the mechanisms of the network in order to better view the superhero as a character type and tradition from a safe distance; in doing so, they gain the advantage of independent legibility, but they also lose the ability to critique the system within its own unique rules of engagement. *Animal Man,* on the other hand,

engages directly with the network in its complexity, accepting the strangeness and awkwardness of this space in order to be able to comment upon and affect it directly.

Crafty's act of transmission of the gospel, though a failure, initiates a journey of discovery for Animal Man; over the two years that followed "The Coyote Gospel" he, like Crafty, grew to understand the mechanisms of the fiction in which he was situated, and grew to question the choices made within it. Soon after "The Coyote Gospel," a reiteration of Animal Man's origin was retold in the story "The Myth of the Creation" in *Secret Origins* #39, which, as the title suggests, was a serial devoted to the origin stories or mythologies of DC superheroes. In most cases, *Secret Origins* presented updated origins of characters as seamless, often taking advantage of the indeterminacy created by *Crisis*. "The Myth of the Creation" diverges from this and instead symbolizes the elided discontinuities of the reiterated "secret origin" as a genre, using the fantastic as a functional motif.

From "The Myth of the Creation" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Origin of the Species 12)

In the story, we meet two yellow aliens, who first appeared in Buddy's second *Strange Adventures* appearance, "The Return of the Man with Animal Powers." They watch Animal Man and his family from their ship with some consternation: "He's *younger*, isn't he? He's become *younger*," says one alien off-panel, as Animal Man's visage is

displayed in a bounded screen. In the next panel, the other, also mostly off-panel, explores a schematic of Animal Man's anatomy, and responds, "Yes, that was the first thing *I* noticed too. I ran a trawl across the entire stratum and discovered *massive* discrepancies. While we slept there seems to have been a catastrophic and unforeseen *assault* on the continuum." The first alien concludes, "I think we should review the creation of 'Animal Man' as *we* remember it… perhaps this will help us to assess the extent of the *damage*" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Origin of the Species 12). The aliens then view an origin story that is conspicuously discontinuous with the Animal Man we have come to know; it is a retelling of his first appearance in *Strange Adventures* #180, September 1965, with all the trappings that locate Animal Man more than 20 years in the past than he should be: as the aliens themselves put it, in their "reading" of the origin story,

> The Buddy Baker we've just observed is surely an older man, living in a barely-defined world. Additionally his attitudes and motivations seem so much less sophisticated than those of the current Buddy Baker. What exactly has happened on this stratum to *change* everyone quite so radically? (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Origin of the Species 20)

The aliens have slept through *Crisis*, and exist outside of its mythological spell: they remember the universe as it existed before (indeed, they can represent it for both their edification and that of the reader) and can even comment critically on the new "sophistication" of psychology and detail that now permeates the universe. They share the perspective of both the pre-*Crisis* fantastic hero and the pre-*Crisis* reader: to them, *Crisis* is a trauma to the "continuum" of the system, and has not been sufficiently reconciled. "The Myth of the Creation" acknowledges and interrogates the innate discontinuity of its own tradition, particularly in the wake of *Crisis*.

The aliens as a fantastic motif, meanwhile, provide a solution for this discontinuity: in later issues of *Animal Man*, we learn they are able to manipulate the

"continuum" and provide a new, logical mythology for Buddy while at the same time acknowledging the fundamental illogic of his past. They first abduct Buddy and "destroy and rebuild" him so that he is coherent as an icon (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Origin of the Species 92); they then call upon him to reconstruct the logic of the continuum through his own reconstructed memories:

> [Alien] Remember how it was when you first became Animal Man. Bind reality's fabric with those memories.
>
> [Animal Man] … head hurts… confused…
>
> [Alien] *Remember*! (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Origin of the Species 94)

Like the Hanged Man in "The Nearness of You," the alien emphasizes memory as key in the maintenance of continuity. This perspective both emphasizes the nature of the universe as an exercise in collective memory, and indicts *Crisis* as a disavowal of memory and history.

Meanwhile[22], as Animal Man is rescuing the continuum with his memories, another character, James Highwater, follows a series of mysterious clues. Highwater debuts in *Animal Man* #8 with the air of a more conventional or novelistic metafiction character: "Is it only some existential terror that makes me feel as though I have been brought into the world with a full set of memories and a purpose already prepared for me?" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Origin of the Species 210) Highwater quickly learns that his "purpose" is to explore the reality of the comics universe in the wake of *Crisis*, an exploration which brings him immediately to Arkham Asylum. Arkham Asylum is the Bedlam of the DC Universe, where insane super-criminals (most of them foes of Batman) are incarcerated during their pauses between cyclic and ongoing crime sprees. Morrison, like Moore before him, brings Arkham into the bounds of mythic and literary tradition by

[22] Used with full appreciation of its association with "adventure-time."

bringing forth difficult truths from the mouths of the mad. Morrison's own graphic novel, *Arkham Asylum*, was published during his tenure on *Animal Man*: in it, Batman is tried – as a character, as an icon, and as an argument on justice and morality – by the criminals he has opposed. One criminal, the Mad Hatter, relates his perspective on reality to Batman in a vignette. In the painted nuance of *Arkham Asylum*, the Hatter muses: "Now, where was I? Where am I? Where will I be?" The panel changes, a close-up of his face, and he says: "Ah yes. The apparent disorder of the universe is simply a *higher* order, an *implicate* order beyond our comprehension," and then, later, "Sometimes… sometimes I think the asylum is a *head*. We're inside a huge head that dreams us all into being" (Morrison and McKean 73).

From *Arkham Asylum* (Morrison and McKean 73)

From "Fox on the Run" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Origin of the Species 34)

This is a meditation on the creative process within the genre of the graphic novel, full of reference to a universe outside, a truth external to the text itself. The Hatter is appealing to general epistemological concepts, not to the internal epistemology of the comics universe. In contrast, when Highwater meets the Mad Hatter, outside the autonomy and high production values of *Arkham Asylum* the graphic novel, and immersed in the serial continuity of the universe, the conversation touches on very similar topics in very different terms:

> We're all words on a page. I just thought you ought to know. We're just a script, rushed out to meet a deadline. We can never aspire to more than penny-dreadful melodrama… Just words on a page! Some cheap hack is writing our lives! No room! No room! (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Origin of the Species 34)

Within the universe and *Animal Man*, the nature of reality is always imbricated with the nature of production: it is always entangled within the materiality, shape and pressures of

the emergent and persistent system. The image of the Mad Hatter in *Arkham Asylum* is painted by Dave McKean, with detailed lines and shading: it is a piece of art meant to be understood as important by a general audience. The image of the Mad Hatter in *Animal Man* is penciled by Chas Truog, inked by Doug Hazlewood, and colored by Tatjana Wood; produced by a team, simple and iconic, it is a piece of art meant to be consumed by the audience of the comics universe. Morrison's Mad Hatters speak in terminology appropriate to their respective positions with regards to the network.

After Highwater is revealed this first truth by the Hatter, he meets the inmate he came to the asylum to visit: Roger Hayden, the Psycho-Pirate. Hayden was last seen in *Crisis on Infinite Earths,* where he was a major character: the only superhero or villain to ally himself with the destructive Anti-Monitor. In the final panels of *Crisis*, Hayden is presented as getting his comeuppance: he is the only character in the series with full memory of what had happened within it, and the only character who remembers the lost infinite earths. The knowledge, predictably, has driven him mad. The depiction of Hayden at the end of *Crisis* is an implicit criticism of memory, of refusing to accept the *Crisis* as a "new broom" that swept the universe clean. The insane Hayden "would rather live in the past than today" and hates the unpredictability of a universe where "nothing's ever certain… nothing's ever predictable like it used to be" (Wolfman et al. 364). Hayden fears the causality and novelistic unpredictability introduced into the system, but he also despises the denial of years of accreted story, and while his perspective is seen as unrealistic and reactionary in *Crisis*, he becomes more of a noble fool in *Animal Man*. Hayden here is not only aware of the Crisis but of his own fictionality: he asks Highwater "Did the Wolfman [Marv Wolfman, the writer of *Crisis*] give you my name?" He then points Highwater to a comics page in the center of his cell. On one side is a vignette which, we will learn more than a year later in the series, is an autobiographical retelling

of Grant Morrison's childhood. The other side is a page from Animal Man's second appearance in *Strange Adventures*, "The Return of the Man with Animal Powers" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Origin of the Species 35-37). This artifact of mediation encapsulates the multiple represented spheres that would be explored in *Animal Man*: Buddy, eventually, must enter into dialogue both with his history and with Grant Morrison himself. The spheres of history and reality are "two sides of the same page:" Morrison is an important part of this dialogue, but so is the comics universe in which he is a participant. This comics page is a point of ontological fusion between past and present representations in comics; in Truog and Hazlewood's depiction, the boundaries of the page become more and less distinct, Escher-like, at various points, such as panel 4, which is a transition point that represents Hayden both within the found page and outside it. We are presented with a perspective where multiple levels of representation are both mediated and given the power to exceed those boundaries of mediation.

From “Fox on the Run” (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Origin of the Species 37)

As the series progresses, Buddy gains more and more knowledge of both Morrison and the comics universe that connects them both. In issue #18, Highwater contacts Buddy, and the two travel to the desert (following Highwater's comics page, which has mysteriously turned into a map). There. they undergo a two-issue hallucinogenic ritual, where Buddy learns from a totem animal from "the world above," a fox[23], that his animal powers come from the "morphogenetic field":

> [Highwater]: This is where your animal powers come from! From the field itself! The field is a mesh of countless smaller fields; each one a blueprint which guides the formation of atoms into molecules, molecules into cells, cells into tissues, organs, systems! (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 22)

Buddy's power, then, does not only connect him to the biosphere or to the spirits of animals; it connects him to the organizing principles of the universe itself. Thus, in his universe, crossover, revision, and semiotic play are as much his field as tigers and eagles. This epiphany accelerates Buddy's metatextual exploration of the nature of the system in which he exists, and that exploration takes him immediately to *Crisis*. Buddy and the totem fox enter a cave, in which Buddy gazes upon cave drawings and immediately recognizes them as a representation of *Crisis;* what's more, he recognizes the Crisis not as "continuity" explains it, as a vague, undifferentiated superhero bash-up, but as the systemic revision it truly was.

Then, calling these revelations "just the overture," the fox totem leads Buddy to new discoveries in *Animal Man* #19, three "secrets" that, together, explain to Buddy the full nature of his existence. The first secret revealed to Buddy is that "everything is connected" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 35); he is told to "watch,"

[23] When Highwater first discovers the comics page in Arkham Asylum, its biographical note on Morrison notes that Morrison's surname, in Gaelic, means "Son of the Fox." Throughout the later part of the series, the fox becomes emblematic of Morrison's communications with Buddy – as well as Morrison's own attempts to communicate with a higher order of reality.

and then he – and the reader – is shown a sequence of panels titled "*Who's Who* in the DC Universe," which delineates Buddy's origin story as it was redefined by his work with the yellow aliens. *Who's Who* was an actual comic, or more accurately a "meta-comic" or "comics encyclopedia"; it was published by DC Comics contemporaneously with *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, and it reinforced the comprehensibility mandated by *Crisis*. The serial presented, alphabetically, discrete descriptions of all the characters and major locales of the DC Universe, and it codified linear origins for each: not histories of their multiplicity and fluidity over time, but rather mythologies that made each character unitary and legible as part of the post-*Crisis* system. Buddy is, therefore, not only presented a material artifact but a reader's mythology; he is shown a fragment of a map of the system, a fragment which, through its "*Who's Who*" packaging, is another material representation of comics within the narrative. Buddy's discovery allows him to reclaim the readerly agency displayed by the Flash years before; it allows him the fantastic meta-understanding of the comics universe as a system or fiction network, a readerly agency denied by *Crisis*.

This agency is deepened by the "second secret," which might appropriately be called "Animal Man of Two Worlds." Truog and Hazlewood present Buddy entering the space of this secret in a process depicted like a birth, or an ejection; after being shown spiraling downwards in the last panel of the "*Who's Who*" pages, Buddy is presented in the first panel of the next page hurling into a completely blank frame, surrounded by red ink – or blood. This panel does not have a clean panel border; it spills into the page from its very edge. These compositions destroy a sense of the panel as camera; Buddy is being pushed from panel to panel, and the reader is encouraged to understand the physical mechanisms of panel transition – and to understand them as violent. Buddy picks himself up from his rough entry into this defamiliarized representational space to see himself, or,

more accurately, his discontinuous precursor: the Buddy Baker of *Strange Adventures*, now – because of the linearity of this post-*Crisis* universe – ostensibly revised out of existence.

> [Old Buddy] …They wiped out *my* life and replaced it with *yours*.
>
> [New Buddy] What? Look, who *are* you? What are you trying to say?
>
> [Old Buddy] I'm *Animal Man*. What happens when the *continuity* changes? What happens to all those lives? Who's *responsible*?
>
> They twist us and torture us. They kill us in our billions. For what? For *entertainment*.
>
> [New Buddy] "*They*"? Who's "*they*"?
>
> [Old Buddy] Our lives are not our own. It's not *fair*. Wasn't I *good* enough?
>
> You've taken my place! I'm not *real* anymore. I'm afraid.
>
> [Old Buddy, fading out of view] I'm so afraid. (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 39-40)

The affect of this sequence is difficult to communicate in criticism, and it unquestionably has the flair of the melodramatic. However, it is also unquestionably more powerful than any moment of operatic tragedy in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. From Morrison's first issue of *Animal Man* on, ethical questions about our responsibility to animals – our responsibility to a weaker other or others – are foregrounded: Morrison cites Peter Singer as a key influence in those early issues, and Singer's – and Morrison's – positions on animals as beings with rights in an ethical system are dramatically performed in the narrative. The reader is invited, through melodrama, to feel shock, grief and anger at the abuse of animals. Here, Morrison, in a compelling way, repurposes the affect he has previously mobilized; he shifts from presenting the killing and abuse of animals to presenting the "deaths" of countless earths and characters in the large-scale revision of *Crisis*. This is not to say, necessarily, that Morrison wishes the user to equate the ethical

rights of animals with the ethical rights of comic book characters (although Morrison has made radical enough statements regarding his perspectives on fiction to hint that this equation may not be impossible). Rather, Morrison skillfully redirects an heightened sphere of affect – the reader's sensitivity to depictions of animal cruelty – to encourage a new sensitivity to the "violence" of the systemic revision in *Crisis*. As readers we are invited to think of Buddy's revision passionately, in terms of ethical obligation, and even if, in the end, we reject such a claim as spurious, we have still engaged with realities of revision and history that *Crisis* invited us to forget. When the "third secret" is then revealed to Buddy – he turns to us, breaking the fourth wall, and exclaims, "I can see you!" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 41) – this more conventional metafictional "secret" occupies a tripartite structure that deals not only with the question "what is fiction?" but also with "what is a comics universe?"

Morrison's invitation to not only understand but react to the violences of post-*Crisis* revision and continuity continues, and affects Buddy directly: after Buddy learns the three secrets, the fox totem tells him, "The truth always costs. I'm so sorry" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 46). When he returns home, Buddy finds that his wife and children have been killed. This event, and the events that follow in the series, can be read as an ongoing dialogue between two perspectives. The first, heavy with consequence and causality, echoes *Watchmen*: Buddy's psyche collapses in reaction to his family's death, and he kills his family's murderers in revenge. The second, though, is fantastic and meta-aware; even as he hunts down the killers, he asserts "It doesn't matter what we do. We're all just characters in a bad story. It's not our fault" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 92). He then finds a time machine, with which he intends to fantastically undo the tragedies that have beset him (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 104). Buddy travels back in time but fails to change it:

he laments of his past self, "If only I could send him down some other path. A path that doesn't have me at the end of it" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 124). At the same time that Buddy fights against the linearity of post-*Crisis* time, Hayden is working to undo it; at Arkham Asylum, he begins to regurgitate disavowed comic books, the first of which is "Flash of Two Worlds" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 112). He quickly moves from respawning material representations to respawning the fictions themselves, and begins to enact the "second Crisis," where all the lost characters, tales, and worlds of the first Crisis are undone (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 135). This second Crisis is not a resurrection, however; it cannot function in the redefined DC Universe, and is depicted as chaos and bedlam, in which the very semiotic boundary of comics, the panel border, is broken and overrun by the returned characters, who gaze upon comic books and realize "this is the shape of spacetime" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 152, 63)

Meanwhile, Buddy, having accepted the irrevocability of time, returns from the past. He, the hero of the morphogenetic field, of the universe as a system, must, with Highwater's help, remedy the chaos Hayden has unleashed. In this quest, he must battle Overman, an iteration of Superman who has emerged from what Hayden calls "a bad world. A world where everything's gone wrong. Who makes these awful worlds?" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 149). Overman is the apotheosis of post-*Crisis*, post-*Watchmen* trends in comics at the time; the melodramatic violence of *Crisis* and the psychological darkness of *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* had congealed into genre conventions of tragedy, shock, violence and sickness. Though it re-employs a signifier that has worked many jobs in this chapter, it is important to note that, in common parlance, the popularization of these genre conventions in comics was described as a turn to "realism," and Overman is presented as the most "realistic" of all

Superman's iterations: created by a government experiment, he is driven irrevocably insane by a "sex virus" and slaughters all the people on his planet. He emerges from Hayden's mind carrying a "doomsday bomb" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 149-50). Buddy defeats him by using his metatextual abilities and manipulating the system; he escapes the comic book panel, forces Overman to do the same, and then squeezes him out of existence, as, unable to confront his own fictionality, Overman cries "No! Let me out! I'm not *like* you! I'm *real*! I'm *realistic*! This can't happen to me! Let me out! It's not my fault I was created to be" and then disappears (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 170). Buddy saves the day, while Highwater takes Hayden's place in Arkham as the custodian of memory, the "sentinel at the threshold of the unreal, mediator between man and the forces of creation… the sacrificial eagle" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 172).

Finally, Buddy, after a journey to "comic book limbo" (where lost and forgotten stories and characters languish), meets Grant Morrison himself, who exposes to him all the mechanisms of the universe:

> [Buddy] You write the *Doom Patrol*, too?
>
> [Grant] Yeah, but *they* don't know.
>
> [Buddy] Do you write *everything*?
>
> [Grant] Don't be ridiculous! If I wrote everything, I'd never *sleep*. I only write a couple of comics and you're one of my characters. *Other* writers are responsible for their own characters.
>
> You live in a world created by *committee*. Someone else writes your life when you're with the *Justice League*. Hadn't you *noticed*?
>
> [Buddy] Well, I suppose… I never seem to *do* much when I'm with the Justice League. (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 213)

Again, while this conversation is certainly metafictional, it's something of a misnomer to call it conventional metafiction; it is a conversation between writer and character completely informed by their context in the comics universe as a persistent, corporate, connected, communally-produced story system. Morrison is laying bare for Buddy – and for us – the mechanisms of a very particular structure. The history of this structure, and its allegiances to multiple understandings of narrative space and time, allow Morrison to converse with Buddy in the first place. Metafiction in the novel is a *departure*, a knowing violation of phenomenological rules inherent to the genre. Metafiction in the comics universe, on the other hand, is an *emergent property of the system*. Morrison's conversation is an innovative moment, a milestone in the progress of the comics universe, but it arises organically from behaviors and meanings accumulated by the universe from the 1940s to the issue's publication date of August 1990.

The structure of the comics universe also allows Morrison to make a final argument of continuity, an interventionary statement toward a "post-post-*Crisis*" universe. Morrison's final explanatory statement to Buddy:

> We'll stop at nothing, you see. All the suffering and death and pain in *your* world is *entertainment* for us. Why does blood and torture and anguish still *excite* us?
>
> We thought that by making your world more *violent*, we would make it more "*realistic,*" more "*adult*." God help us if that's what it means. Maybe, for once, we could try to be *kind*. (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 224)

Mobilizing, again, the issues of ethical obligation introduced in the series – and the affect that accompanies them – Morrison connects the developing trends in the DC Universe, born of *Crisis* and of "realistic" approaches to narrative, to cruelty; he, arguably, connects the agonistic conflict inherent in superhero comics to this cruelty as well. He then rejects all these motifs and, in a moment of deus ex machina, brings Buddy's wife and children back to life, deliberately without linear explanation or justification. This is not only an

act of kindness, and not only a moment of metafictional arbitration: this resurrection represents a statement in a dialogue, performed within the DC Universe, regarding what it is and what rules govern it. Morrison's tenure on *Animal Man* concludes with an argument for the fantastic as an operative mode in the DC Universe, and for the acknowledgement of the inevitable discontinuities such a network generates.

Geoff Klock has noted that Morrison's own rhetoric is full of the fantastic (Klock 129): Morrison describes himself as a chaos magician with experience in alien abduction and an interest in contributing to the rise of a new, enlightened reality called the "supercontext" through his comics, which are, in his terminology, "sigils" imbued with real-world transformative power. Whether Morrison's claims of magical power have any basis in real causality or not, these statements reveal a perspective in line with concepts of the fiction network: this network can be manipulated beyond the bounds of its own current physics; the traditions of comics universes make them constant presences, where monthly characters co-inhabit readers' worlds for decades; the creator's ability to manipulate anything about it is bounded only by the impulses of the corporate/creative community that guides it, and the individual creator's political or rhetorical capital within that system.

EPILOGUE: POST-POST-*CRISIS*

The DC Universe as it exists today has regained much of the complexity *Crisis* strove to eliminate. This is partially because of Morrison's own work; after *Animal Man*, he wrote two serials that surpassed his earlier work in popularity and circulation, *The Invisibles* and *Justice League of America (JLA)*. *The Invisibles* sold erratically during its serial publication, but enjoyed critical acclaim as a mature work; *JLA*, on the other hand, received less critical acclaim outside comics fandom, but was the top-selling comic book

in the direct market during his tenure as writer[24]. As writer of *JLA*, Morrison presented comprehensive and hyperbolic depictions of the DC Universe's fictional space, bringing multiple genres into accelerated juxtaposition. Geoff Klock writes:

> Morrison allows mutually exclusive metaphysics to stand in relief… On the field of the JLA he is able to play one realm off the other, never placing them in any kind of hierarchy, allowing rival superhero metaphysics to engage in dialectic. (Klock 126)

However, this dialectic, as we have seen, is not unique to Morrison's *JLA*: what Klock calls "the overdetermination of superhero metaphysics" (Klock 127) has been inherent in the comics universe as a system for decades, and was not abated by *Crisis*, despite its intent. Even as Morrison interrogated what *Crisis* had done to the comics universe's history, DC Comics found itself unable to resist the complexity and connectivity it performed in the 12-issue series. The operatic, company-wide crossover became its own genre, with each year bringing global events, from *Legends* to *Invasion!* to *Zero Hour* to *War of the Gods*, that unearthed hundreds of heroes and villains and aggregated new continuity within the overall universe. DC began branding itself as "The Original Universe," using its networking and history as a selling point. This erosion of the changes brought by *Crisis* was informed by what Klock calls "a change… in the perspective that saw unwieldy chaos as a bad thing" (Klock 24) . Though Klock's sentiment is, I think, correct, I would dispute the phrase *unwieldy chaos* and instead suggest *complexity*. "The Original Universe," as an aggregate of artifacts, is chaotic and nonsensical, but there are social and representational systems in place whose function is to make sense of that chaos. The meaning of a comics universe lies, finally, in the

[24] Morrison has noted more than once that he was using the two books to explore the same concepts in different contexts: "*Invisibles* is the laboratory and *JLA* is the tennis court. You'll notice in *JLA* things I was doing in the *Invisibles* two years ago - they're mainstream now - I can do the fifth dimension stuff and things that people just didn't understand and they're now acceptable in a kids comic" (Vega-Rasner and Lien).

evolution of those systems, and, in the wake of *Crisis*, they have evolved to a point where disavowal or denial of history is no longer a popular mechanism.

Indeed, Morrison's work *Flex Mentallo*, written after *Animal Man,* is one of several comics texts that symbolize those systems, in all their complexity; these texts do not inherit the history and mechanisms of a comics universe, but replicate them in order to connect to and investigate them. Alan Moore's work from the late 1990s to the present has been full of these instances: his serial *Supreme* for Image Comics introduced the Supremacy, a concept that presented multiple iterations of the hero Supreme (himself a Superman pastiche) and generated from scratch the convolutions of story it took DC Comics years to accumulate. What Bennett and Woollacott, via Jim Collins, call "encrustation" – the accretion of meanings through the activation and reactivation of a "mobile signifier" over time – becomes not only a narrative reality but a fictional practice (Collins 167), and Moore's critique of the superhero as a figure within the novelistic structures of *Watchmen* is succeeded by his exploration of the underlying mechanisms of a comics universe. Moore's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, on the other hand, brought the mechanism of crossover to the public domain and explored the possibilities presented by connecting[25] various Victorian heroes and monsters in a "team up" book. In both texts, Moore has decoupled these emergent narrative phenomena from their original contexts to explore what they might mean on their own terms.

In the meantime, new phenomena have emerged within the DC and Marvel universes. Perhaps the most widespread by-product of post-*Crisis* restructuring at DC was the introduction of "Elseworlds," a brand with which DC denotes superhero works that are non-canonical or outside the DC Universe proper. With "Elseworlds" as a

[25] It's important to note that science fiction and fantasy writer Philip Jose Farmer presented a similar concept, "The Wold Newton Universe," years earlier in his prose. For more information: http://www.pjfarmer.com/woldnewton/Pulp.htm

signifier, DC can expand its iconic properties as much as it likes, exploring various iterations of its heroes, without committing to the connectivity their pre-*Crisis* physics required. Predictably, however, the boundaries between "Elseworlds" and the universe have been breached more than once, most notably in *The Kingdom*, another company-wide opera that connected the "Elseworld" of *Kingdom Come*, a popular superhero apocalypse fantasy, with the mainstream thread of the universe. This connection was a deliberate discontinuity that was explained through a concept called "Hypertime," a mechanism which tried to symbolize the practice of continuity – the construction of the universe as a fictional space through a consensus understanding of history – as a fantastic motif in itself. Though *The Kingdom* was written by mainstream "fan favorite" Mark Waid, Waid freely admits that Hypertime as a concept was the result of a collaborative effort with Grant Morrison.

At Marvel, the coherent universe of the 1960s has given way to a different sort of narrative multiplicity. Marvel has maintained many reiterations and discontinuities in its persistent fiction, from multiple alternate worlds and futures in *X-Men* to intertextual complexity that would put *Crisis* to shame in the recent *JLA/Avengers*. Marvel has never chosen to revise or retroactively redefine the shape of its master narrative. The Marvel Universe, perhaps because of its relative youth, gets by with a little discontinuity here and there, and utilizes the oneiric qualities of its genre skillfully; Marvel has always manifested less internal anxiety about its own continuity than DC has, and as a result the inevitable discontinuities are more readily accepted and integrated by the overall network. Perhaps more importantly, Marvel has recently chosen not to appeal to new audiences through a "big tent" revision of the main narrative, but rather through fragmentation and narrowcasting. The Marvel Universe, once uncomplicatedly canonical, is now increasingly referred to as "616" by fans: "616" denotes the numeric

assignment of Marvel's main narrative in a cosmic system that contains, presumably, infinite universes. While 616 maintains the historical Marvel Universe, the newly-introduced "Ultimate" universe reiterates Marvel's popular properties without the historical baggage: "Ultimate" titles are marketed outside the direct market of comic book shops to appeal to new readers, but are quickly accumulating their own history and complexity.

All these developments, however, must be read within a larger context: both DC and Marvel have reenvisioned and reoriented themselves as companies.

> With a library of over 4,700 proprietary characters, Marvel Enterprises, Inc. is one of the world's most prominent character-based entertainment companies. Marvel's operations are focused in three areas: entertainment (Marvel Studios) and licensing, comic book publishing and toys (Toy Biz). Marvel facilitates the creation of entertainment projects, including feature films, DVD/home video, video games and television based on its characters and also licenses its characters for use in a wide range of consumer products and services including apparel, collectibles, snack foods and promotions. Marvel's characters and plot lines are created by its comic book division which continues to expand its leadership position in the U.S. and worldwide while also serving as an invaluable source of intellectual property. (Marvel Entertainment: About Marvel)

Marvel is not in the comic book business, at least not primarily; it is in the "character-based entertainment" or intellectual property business. Marvel's fragmentation or narrowcasting in comics is a subsection of its deployment of object-codes and/or narremes across as many media as possible. In addition, while DC still advertises itself as primarily a comics company, Eileen Meehan's analysis of Warner Communications' evolution in the late 1980s and early 1990s shows that it preceded Marvel in its restructuring by several years, and now acts as an "operation focus" for a larger enterprise, Time Warner, that (among a great many other things) brings DC's intellectual property to multiple media. The coherent fictional spaces within these comics universes are encompassed by more diffuse networks of fictional iterations that, again, permeate the

mediasphere. The intertexts of this larger networks have far less narrative coherence but nonetheless exist in a mutually informative state with their component comics universes: their respective “encrustations” build upon each other. As Marvel and DC have “facilitated the creation of entertainment projects,” they have spent considerable time in the semiotic genres of video and computer games. For our purposes here, it is key to note that Marvel is, in partnership with Vivendi-Universal, developing a persistent world game called “Marvel Universe” ("Marvel Forms Video Game Group to Accelerate Growth in This Powerful Entertainment Category"). At this point, the reader hopefully understands the affinities this reflects within the perspective of fiction networking. They will, I believe, become clearer as I explore persistent world games in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Persistent Worlds

Immerse yourself in *Star Wars*® in a way you've only dreamed!

Star Wars Galaxies™ is the first massively multiplayer online role playing game based on the *Star Wars*® universe that lets you live the movies with thousands of other players! (Star Wars Galaxies)

So what about the *virtual* part [of virtual worlds]? Not to get too philosophical about it:

- Real. That which is.
- Imaginary. That which isn't.
- Virtual. That which isn't, having the form or effect of that which is.

Virtual worlds are places where the imaginary meets the real. (Bartle 1)

Massively multiplayer online role playing games, or persistent world games – I prefer the term "persistent world games," partially because of the term's thematic emphasis on persistence, but also because of its relative brevity – are large-scale, graphical, persistent, multi-user online digital environments in which players create avatars – virtual characters through which the player can act – and then participate and play in a fictive space, rendered in three dimensions with an increasing amount of detail and visual fidelity as technologies improve. Persistent world games are generated, of course, in computer technology, through servers, clients, and the interactions between them. Using client software, a user connects to the persistent world's server (or one of its multiple servers, or *shards*) and experiences a shared game experience with other players,

whose clients are also connected to the server. Some data is kept on the user's home client, other data on the server (and *which* data varies by game). On the client side, some data is stored with some permanence, and other data can be logged, but, for the most part, the experience is real-time and ephemeral: an ever-fleeting participation in a fiction. On the server side, though, the experience is not ephemeral but persistent: the world remains whether a given participant is logged on or not, and it accumulates the residue of ongoing and informative social gaming.

If the comics universe is the oldest example of fiction networking, of the creation and expansion of an intertextually-defined fictional world through the aggregation of many textual artifacts, then the persistent world may be its purest example: tens to hundreds of thousands of clients act as instantiations of a persistent, server-hosted fictional world, which is defined by the ongoing operations – and mutual interactions – of those clients. "Client/server" here is an operative binary, but the text is generated in the relationship between the two, or, most accurately, in the relationships among clients mediated by the server. Persistent world games are fiction networks in the most literal sense: computer networks dedicated to the development of a fictional world.

These games, fairly expensive to produce and maintain, are often spun from branded entertainment properties to minimize risk. Though a game like *EverQuest* has become a brand all its own, several current and upcoming persistent world games read like the marquee of a multiplex cinema – *The Matrix Online, Middle Earth Online, Marvel Universe, Star Wars Galaxies*. There's a natural affinity between branded entertainment properties such as *Star Wars* or *The Matrix* – fiction networks that occur across multiple media – and a persistent world game, a fiction network that occurs as a large-scale simulation. Persistent fiction networks nurture persistent fan networks – consumers who engage with the ongoing unfolding of the narrative, deepening the

universe that most people experience only when the next blockbuster movie installment arrives – and persistent world games allow that engagement to happen immersively, mediated by a world that replicates the fictional world of the network and allows participants to interact directly with it. The interpretive sense of immersion in the reading of a text, or the social sense of immersion in the development of identity within a fan group, is escalated to a mechanical or operative immersion: entry into a fictional world as a direct agent within the fiction. The persistent world game, then, is not only a fiction network in itself, but often, particularly in cases we will focus on here, a subsystem of a larger fiction network.

However, the persistent world game is also termed a *game* or a simulation, and as such cannot be compared to comic book universes or multiple-media universes in too facile a manner. Earlier, I discussed the distinctions between reading and play, and the impact of this distinction on the persistent world game as a fiction network. The distinctions between reading and play, and stories and games, have been a point of discussion in a significant body of scholarly work, particularly recently; so, before discussing further the persistent world game as a fiction network, I think it would be worthwhile to elaborate upon other theoretical approaches to persistent world games – and to digital games in general – proposed over the past several years, during an extraordinarily fertile period of publication in "game studies."

NARRATIVE, FICTION, AND LUDOLOGY

Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* is an important early exploration into the field of what she terms digital or interactive narrative. It was written in 1997, and some of Murray's predictions and analyses have been compromised by the passage of time and the growth of technology, but this is a natural consequence of current game scholarship,

where the field of paradigms and technologies is constantly shifting. Her analysis and terminology has been incorporated and adapted as a foundation of subsequent video game analysis. In *Holodeck,* Murray identifies the *multiform story*, a story phenomenon predominant in digital forms but also present in analog or codex texts:

> I am using the term *multiform story* to describe a written or dramatic narrative that presents a single situation or plotline in multiple versions, versions that would be mutually exclusive in our everyday experience. (Murray 30)

Murray, as one might expect, mentions Borges as an author of multiform stories, and also mentions the film *Groundhog Day*. Murray argues that, despite a possible critical awkwardness with the multiform story, we as a culture have an increasing comfort with them:

> Whether multiform narrative is a reflection of post-Einsteinian physics or of a secular society haunted by the chanciness of life or of a new sophistication in narrative thinking, its alternate versions of reality are now part of the way we think, part of the way we experience the world. To be alive in the twentieth century is to be aware of the alternative possible selves, of alternative possible worlds, and of the limitless intersecting stories of the actual world. (Murray 38)

Our past discussion of comics universes likewise indicates a comfort with multiform narrative, with reiterative representations and multiple possible worlds; *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, read in this context, provides a partial rationale for analyzing the correspondences between comics universes and games as multiform story structures.

Murray's section "The Active Audience" points out another key phenomenon we see inside and outside of digital narratives: audience agency and activity, a corollary to multiform narratives. Implicit in the presentation of multiform narrative is an audience that understands the textual complexity and navigational requirements inherent in multiform constructions. This audience takes on a mechanically participatory role in the construction of the narrative and experiences "a new kind of story pleasure, a delight not in the tale but in the fertile mind of the writer" (Murray 39). Murray, however, puts

boundaries on this activity; it is not clear from her analysis whether those boundaries are structural or aesthetic.

> Giving the audience access to the raw materials of creation runs the risk of undermining the narrative experience. I lose patience with Calvino when he repeatedly dissolves the illusion. (Murray 40)

Specifically, Murray loses patience with Calvino because of his recurrent uses of metafictional turns; the "illusion" here is an illusion of "losing oneself in the text," an experience of diminishing awareness of a text's mechanics and a sense of immediacy with the represented world. This is a point Murray repeats later in the text, when she discusses agency in digital narratives and demarcates it clearly from authorship: too much audience power, in her framework, spoils the story. This provokes some questions about the role of interactivity in Murray's "interactive narrative": there are boundaries to what agency can be, and a violation of those boundaries – too much audience activity – violates, in Murray's analysis, narrative as a concept. This provokes a question regarding what role suspension of disbelief, and some level of yielding to the author on the part of the audience, has in the definition for a story or narrative, and what to do about stories or narratives which violate these boundaries of narrative agency. However, it also provokes an investigation of these concepts of narrative immersion and control; one may consider whether we are confronted with new ways of conceiving of experience here, and whether these experiences situate agency and immersion in different ways. Perhaps we have reached a point where our understanding of suspension of disbelief -- our classification of "losing oneself" as a key pleasure -- needs to be reconsidered and recontextualized. This, again, points to phenomena I argue are also endemic to comics universes and to fiction networks in general: the oscillation of story and storymaking at points of ontological fusion, the blurring of the thing made and the ongoing act of making it.

Murray continues to foreground and analyze boundary as a concept throughout *Hamlet on the Holodeck,* exploring the distinctions and overlaps among real, meta-representational, and representational truth-values and among author, agent, and audience in a multiform narrative. Again, many of the tensions in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* – the proper role of agency in the digital space, the authority of the writer/creator vs. that of the player – point to a question of formal type, a question of how, exactly, to describe such interactive narratives. The phenomena in question, later theorists would argue, operate differently from narratives as conventionally theorized, and not merely because they are digital. They are different because they are games, and are therefore a crucially distinct sort of activity.

Such a line of argument, key to what is increasingly called "video game theory" or "ludology," often points back to studies like Roger Caillois' *Man, Play and Games*, an anthropological analysis of the role of games in society which also presents a typology of games that has acted as a foundation for further study of their mechanisms. A response to Johann Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, it attempts to build upon Huizinga's theory of play, and, most importantly, to distinguish "the diversified forms of play and the many needs served by play activity in various cultural contexts" (Caillois vii).

In his typology of play and games, Caillois emphasizes the space or boundaries of play:

> In effect, play is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life, and generally is engaged in with precise limits of time and place… In every case, the game's domain is therefore a restricted, closed, protected universe: a pure space. (Caillois 6-7)

The space of gaming is not anarchic; on the contrary, it is very much structured and given meaning, usually by rules:

> The confused and intricate laws of ordinary life are replaced, in this fixed space and for this given time, by precise, arbitrary, unexceptionable rules that must be

> accepted as such and that govern the correct playing of the game. If the cheat violates the rules, he at least pretends to respect them. He does not discuss them: he takes advantage of the other players' loyalty to the rules. (Caillois 7)

Despite the certainty of rule structures, the indeterminacy of play is key to a game, and its pleasure resides in the doubt over outcome that persists until the end of the game. There is then a negotiation inherent in a game, between the structures of rules and the freedom of progress and response within those rules, that gives meaning to play (Caillois 7-8).

Games do not necessarily imply rules: there are also games as *fictions*, instances of free play or role play where the structures of fiction replace the structures of rules of engagement: "Despite the assertion's paradoxical character, I will state that in this instance the fiction, the sentiment of *as if* replaces and performs the same function as do rules. Rules themselves create fictions" (Caillois 8). The rules of a game, whether simulative or imaginary, establish a space of play distinct from real life, and allow the player to inhabit that game or fiction: "Thus games are not ruled and make-believe. Rather, they are ruled *or* make-believe" (Caillois 9). This description of "play" as enacting fiction echoes the double meaning of "play" in English: play as drama.

Caillois distinguishes six primary characteristics of games: they are *free* and entered into without obligation; they are *separate* from everyday life and bounded by the space of play; they are *uncertain* and completed by "the player's initiative"; they are *unproductive*, "creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and, except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game"; they are *governed by rules*; and, they are *make-believe* (Caillois 9-10). There are, according to Caillois, four distinct "rubrics" for games: *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation), *and ilinx* (vertigo) (Caillois 12). All four categories are spanned by a continuum between *paidia* – "an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and

carefree gaiety" – and *ludus* – "a growing tendency to bind [paidia] with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions, to oppose it still more by ceaselessly practicing the most embarrassing chicanery upon it, in order to make it more uncertain of attaining its desired effect" (Caillois 13). Again, the act of gaming is characterized by a tension between the structures of rules and the indeterminacy of play.

Hobbies are "a special form of *ludus*" to Caillois: "It has been observed that the hobby of the worker-turned-artisan readily takes the form of constructing *complete* scale models of the machines in the fabrication of which he is fated to cooperate by always repeating the same movement, an operation demanding no skill or intelligence on his part. He not only avenges himself upon reality, but in a positive and creative way. The hobby is a response to one of the highest functions of the play instinct" (Caillois 32). This description of the hobbyist evokes the fan as Henry Jenkins has presented her, as a recreative force that perceives a text as "something that can and must be rewritten to make it more productive of personal meanings and to sustain the intense emotional experience they enjoyed when they viewed it the first time" (Jenkins, Textual Poachers 75). In both cases, the receptive/interpretive process of reading or spectating is supplemented, and reception, appropriation and creation are intertwined. Gaming and fandom are both active pursuits that not only involve the consumption of text but the active rewriting and supplement of it: though fan practices as Jenkins portrays them are interventionary departures from conventional reading, the active impulse is a necessary component of Caillois' theory of play.

This impulse of play, however powerful, must in Caillois' argument remain bounded; in the fourth chapter of the book, "The Corruption of Games," he suggests that "it may be of interest to ask what becomes of games when the sharp line dividing their ideal rules from the diffuse and insidious laws of daily life is blurred" (Caillois 43).

Caillois' answer to this question is a negative one: a game whose space exceeds its bounds becomes an obsession, and "what was once a pastime is now a source of anxiety" (Caillois 44). He presents a postlapsarian condition, where play as a organizing principle is lost, and the actions become mundane and brutal. Like Murray, Caillois invests a great deal of importance in the boundary between the fictive space of the game and the real world outside it; this boundary gives the space meaning. As we will see, this argument is problematized by the sometimes indistinct boundaries that circumscribe a persistent world game.

Caillois' focus and typology have become useful to a group of scholars who were dissatisfied with existing approaches in literary theory to video games and similar interactive works. In his essay "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory," Espen Aarseth begins to explore the limits of then-predominant hypertext theories to describe these phenomena, and begins to suggest alternatives. The first issue he raises is the coupling of a given literary behavior with technology, which, he asserts, perhaps obscures the real issues manifested:

> The advent of computer-mediated textuality seems to have left many of those theorists and critics who noticed in a terminological vacuum. In their eagerness to describe the brave new reality, they let a few words like *electronic* and *hypertext* cover many different phenomena. Behind the electronic text there is a large and heterogeneous variety of phenomena, and, as we shall see, a computer-mediated text may have more in common with a paper-based one than with one of its electronic brethren. (Aarseth, "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory" 51)

Aarseth decouples the phenomena he describes from their technologies in an attempt to obviate this imprecision; he suggests, instead, a typology based on "traversal functions," which categorizes texts in terms of how they are navigated or constructed by the reader, using Aarseth's distinction between *text* (roughly, the work as authored, before reading) and *script* (the work as manifested in the reading process). Aarseth identifies six key

"variates" in traversal: *topology* (linear/nonlinear), *dynamics* (constant state of data/changing state of data), *determinability* (constant arrangement of script/dynamic arrangement of script), *transiency* (synchronicity between diegetic time and real time), *maneuverability* (level of access to various portions of a script), and *user-functionality* (the use made of the text, whether exploration, role-playing, configuration, or poetics). Aarseth suggests this as a general typology for texts, and locates hypertext in specific configurations of these variates, ones not terribly different from ones we already find familiar:

> … one traditional term seems almost perfect to describe literary hypertexts… [the literary hypertext] *Afternoon* does not represent a break with the *novel*. On the contrary, it finds its place in a long tradition of experimental literature in which one of the main strategies is to subvert and resist narrative. The novel ("the new"), from Cervantes to the *Roman Nouveau*, has always been an anti-genre, and *Afternoon* is but its latest confirmation. (Aarseth, "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory" 71)

Aarseth invokes Bakhtin's terminology of the novel as "anti-genre" to make clear a distinction between the experiments of the novelistic hypertext *Afternoon* as a form with phenomenological and structural systems of innovation and control of a piece with the novel. He then situates a different category – *cybertext* – within different configurations of variates, ones which imply an external, dynamic controller that generates text:

> A cybertext is a self-changing text, in which scriptons and traversal functions are controlled by an immanent cybernetic agent, either mechanical or human. (Aarseth, "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory" 71-72)

The fluidity of the cybertext, then, lies beyond the theoretical spheres of frameworks where the reader has the power to construct *meaning* from the text; in cybertext, the text itself is literally recombined in the act of reading. Cybertext as a concept emerges from Aarseth's distinction between textonomic (operating on the level of media) operations and textologic (operating on the level of meaning) operations, and divides innovative yet

mechanically linear or "unicursal" works ("Even in highly subversive narratives, such as the novels of Samuel Beckett or Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*… , the reader is faced, topologically, with a unicursal maze" (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 7)) from Oulipan combinatory experiments like Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards* and other textonomic "labyrinths" ("Julio Cortazar's *Rayuela*, in which the topology is multicursal… Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*… may be described as both unicursal and multicursal[26]" (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 7)). Cybertext as a textonomic category designates a text where "the effort and energy demanded… of the reader raise the stakes of interpretation to those of intervention" (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 4).

> Aarseth expands upon his concept in his work *Cybertext*:
>
> During the cybertextual process, the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of "reading" do not account for. This phenomenon I call *ergodic*… in ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 1)

"Cybertext" is presented more broadly in *Cybertext*, as a perspective with repercussions for all forms of textuality, or as a model of "literary behavior." Cybertext is a view of a text "as a machine – not metaphorically but as a mechanical device for the production and consumption of verbal signs" (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 21). This perspective offers, in his argument, a new way of situating interactive texts within "literature":

> The reason for this is pragmatic rather than ethical: a search for traditional literary values in texts that are neither intended nor structured as literature will only obscure the unique aspects of these texts and transform a formal investigation into an apologetic crusade. If these texts redefine literature by expanding our notion

[26] *Pale Fire* occupies this framework as a "limit-text," which can either be read directly through (unicursally) or with an alternation between commentary and poem contained within the text (multicursally) (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 8)

> of it – and I believe that they do – then they must also redefine what is literary, and therefore they cannot be measured by an old, unmodified aesthetics. (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 22-23)

Aarseth's category is offered as a more apt alternative to preexisting approaches to electronic literature; he delineates, in particular, both the inadequacy of existing semiotic studies in their approach to the cybernetic systems within ergodic literature, and the imprecision of "interactivity" as a descriptor. Specifically, the vagueness of "interaction," in Aarseth's mind, does not account for the range of authorial, mechanical, and readerly presences within ergodic texts.

Aarseth goes further to question the validity of both the component terms in the category "interactive fiction." His interrogation of "fiction," in my opinion, deserves closer exploration here. Aarseth disputes the description of a game as fiction by describing drama as non-fictive, and games, consequently, as less so:

> Such interactive fiction as an adventure game is even less fictive than a staged drama, since the user can explore the simulated world and establish causal relationships between the encountered objects in a way denied to the readers of *Moby Dick* or the audience of *Ghosts*. The adventure game user cannot rely on imagination (and previous experience) alone but must deduce the nonfictive laws of the simulated world by trial and error in order to complete the game. (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 50)

This argument relies on the assumption that drama is not fictive, and that "fiction" is defined by two key aspects, which Aarseth delineates earlier: 1.) a portrayal of an invented space, usually embodied in prose; 2.) an implicitly uncomplicated suspension of disbelief. My previous reading of Pavel in Chapter 2 hopefully complicates this definition of fiction; fiction as a state of alternate truth-value can accommodate a wide range of phenomenological relations between itself and its perceiver, and implies points of relation between itself and its perceiver in the concept of ontological fusion. In addition to this, I must note that "nonfictive laws of a simulated world" seems to be an

inherently contradictory notion. The laws of a simulated world are unavoidably rhetorical or imaginary, as they inevitably differ significantly from the laws of the real world; what's more, these simulated laws are often constructed primarily to engage the imaginary. In the XBox game *Spider-Man*, I can climb on walls, hide myself on a ceiling, swing from skyscraper to skyscraper; in *Second Life,* I can fly from place to place with the simple use of my Page-Up key. The physics of these spaces operate on their own sets of internal logic and, clearly, are made things, of distinct truth-value from our lived physics and constructed specifically to engage our belief in their fantastic, simulated worlds. Aarseth states that "a fiction that must be tested to be consumed is no longer a pure fiction; it is a construction of a different kind"; however, more convincing is Pavel's assertion that describing a "pure fiction" is itself a problematic enterprise, as our cultural definition of fiction is itself fluid. This understanding of "fiction" as relative and open to elaboration is key, particularly given ongoing debates of the reality or fictiveness of online worlds (see Dibbell, A Rape in Cyberspace).

In *Cybertext*, Aarseth revises his list of "variates" from "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory," removing topology as a variate, adding *perspective* (personal/impersonal relationship between reader and text), renaming maneuverability as *access*, and adding *linking* (explicit, conditional, or no links from scripton to scripton). He also defines *text*, for his purposes, as exclusively verbal. Using his new list of variates, he is able to assign positions to a variety of texts, from the I Ching to novels to Oulipan texts, and is able to prove as much commonality as discontinuity among codex and digital texts. He then turns his eye to text-based adventure games in particular, which, in Aarseth's typology, are determinable, intransient, personal, controlled, conditional, exploratory texts that manifest an intratextonic dynamics (the textons remain fixed, while scriptons are dynamic); these games or cybertexts "disintegrate any notion of story":

> Instead of a narrated plot, cybertext produces a sequence of oscillating activities effectuated (but certainly not controlled) by the user. (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 112)

Aarseth proposes, in lieu of narrative relationships, relationships of *intrigue,*

> …to suggest a secret plot in which the user is the innocent, but voluntary, target (*victim* is too strong a term), with an outcome that is not yet decided – or rather with several possible outcomes that depend on various factors, such as the cleverness and experience of the player…
>
> … intrigue constitutes a multidimensional event space and unfolds through the negotiation of this space by text and user. This unfolding brings to mind the concept of a log, a recording of a series of experienced events. Thus the determinate cybertext reconfigures literary experience along a different plane than the narrative. Instead of a narrative constituted of a story or plot, we get an intrigue-oriented ergodic log… ergodic *discourse*. (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 112-14)

This distinction between narrative and intrigue will be resituated as a distinction between narrative and game play, and will take center stage in later criticism.

In his chapter "Songs from the MUD," Aarseth argues convincingly for the textuality of MUDs (Multi-User Domains), but again wrestles with their fictionality, initially stating that "the text type we are dealing with is inhabited by real people, in a most direct and nonfictional way" but later calling the MUD "the medium that allows the freest experimentation with fictitiousness and personality" (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 145, 49). Aarseth alludes to the generic possibilities of an open system such as the MUD:

> Unfettered by ergodic restraints such as aporetic topologies and generic intrigues typical of hyperfictions and adventure games, users are free to engage their coplayers in any way they like: a player may decide to alternate between exploratory, metadiscursive, episodic, melodramatic, lyrical, picaresque, erotic, comic, didactic, elegiac, surrealistic, rhapsodic, philosophical, burlesque, or mystic experiences, to name a few. In an open MUD, all modes and genres are available for appropriation, and users with building permits may create the equivalence of hyperfictions or single-user adventure games within the MUD topology, by creating and describing rooms, objects and links between them. The

> MUD subsumes these other structures, and it is therefore a metamedium or metagenre in more than one sense, as it can be used to emulate both previous forms of expression (even the codex) and multiple styles and paradigms of writing. (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 158)

He then points out that limitations upon these generic possibilities, if any, are enforced by the community that coalesces around the MUD, specifically, the "wizards" or high-level users with the most access and control over the space's operations. The wizard holds considerable power over the community, but must negotiate with the community (see, again, Dibbell, A Rape in Cyberspace). This community is, in the final analysis, the aggregate creative force that shapes the MUD, and the creative process is coterminous with the accretion of time: "We should consider the text as an unfinished historical process of system transformation, the sum of all evolutionary stages and paraphrases" (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 177).

CURRENT VIDEO GAME THEORY

Aarseth's arguments in *Cybertext*, coupled with the studies of games done by Caillois, Huizinga and others, have proven powerful enough to inspire their own school of thought. A number of scholars have taken on "ludology" as a specific approach for the study of games; though these scholars acknowledge the uses of narrative theory in studying games, they describe ludology as distinct from narratology, a field that emphasizes games as cybernetic or ergodic systems rather than representational systems.

In his essay "Simulation versus Narrative: An Introduction to Ludology," Gonzalo Frasca argues that games are not narratives but rather simulations; he extends Aarseth's assertion that "these works are not just made of sequences of signs but, rather, behave like machines or sign-generators" (Frasca 223). Frasca attempts to differentiate the artistic impetus that creates simulations from the impetus behind narratives:

> …[authors of narrative] "train" their stories so they will always perform in an almost predictable way, By contrast, [authors of simulations] "educate" their simulations: they teach them some rules and may have an idea of how they might behave in the future, but they can never be sure of the exact final sequence of events and result. The key trait of simulational media is that it relies on rules: rules that can be manipulated, accepted, rejected, and even contested. (Frasca 229)

From this analysis, Frasca suggests a methodology based on "simulation rhetoric," which approaches not only the representational level of a game but also three levels of simulation rules: manipulation rules (what is possible within the game), goal rules (what must be done in order to advance in the game), and meta-rules (what rules may be changed in modifying the game into new variants). Frasca proposes that a ludologically-sound reading of any game accounts not only for the first, representational level, but also "reads" these various rules in order to understand games as artistic forms that make meaning through the construction of cybernetic systems of choice and possibility.

Ludology as presented is a popular – but not dominant – perspective currently brought to games as objects of study; its focus on rule systems can be useful, but is complemented by other forms of analysis which focus on other phenomena within the game. Ludologists (sometimes begrudgingly) acknowledge the importance of story, society, and identity within games, while other critics have studied the cultural position of games within larger systems of media, expanding the field beyond the study of cybernetic systems of rules to the study of gaming in general, with an emphasis on the form's uniqueness.

Perhaps as popular a focus as rule systems in computer game studies is the space of the player and avatar, and the phenomenological structures that circumscribe it. In his "Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar," Bob Rehak brings Lacanian theories

of the mirror stage as well as current media theory from such scholars as Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin to argue that

> Often collapsed in discussions of virtual reality (VR) to a transparent, one-to-one correspondence, players actually exist with their avatars in an unstable dialectic whose essential heterogeneity should not be elided. Players experience games through the exclusive intermediary of another – the avatar – the "eyes," "ears," and "body" of which are components of a complex technological and psychological apparatus. (Rehak 104)

The phenomenon of the game avatar, metaphorized by Murray as a "mask" the player wears to mark her participation, is in Rehak's analysis complicated and given more psychic authority; it becomes something which

> meet[s] the criteria of Lacan's *objet petit a*. Appearing on the screen in place of the player, the avatar does double duty as self and other, symbol and index…. Both limited and freed by difference from the player, they can accomplish more than the player alone; they are supernatural ambassadors of agency. (Rehak 106)

The avatar, rather than just an extension of the player, is in Rehak's reading an "end in itself" that the player engages with in a process of rejection and desire, a digital game of *fort/da*. Mia Consalvo's work on sexual identification and video games continues this thread of analysis by reading the disjunctions within mainstream video games, which presume a heterosexual male subject, from the perspective of women or gay men who play (Consalvo). There is a complexity of identification with the avatar, the player's agent in the game world, informed by the status of the avatar exceeding the interpretive agency of a story's narrator and becoming a mechanical agent in the operations of the game. The complexity of the avatar as a phenomenon – a complexity of the virtual, of intersection between the real and the imaginary – corresponds in many ways with the complexity of the persistent world game as a fiction, a complexity which, perhaps, requires us to problematize Caillois' assertion of a bounded game space in the case of the persistent world game.

PERSISTENT WORLD GAMES

Significant gaps arise when applying existing theories of digital games to persistent world games. Perhaps the most provocative is the gap between Murray's understanding of the space of play as bounded, or Caillois' assertions that a game must be *unproductive* and must exist outside an everyday economy, and the porosity between the real world and the simulated world in persistent world games. In his study on Norrath, the world represented in *EverQuest*, economics professor Edward Castronova found that

> The nominal hourly wage is about USD 3.42 per hour, and the labors of the people produce a GNP per capita somewhere between that of Russia and Bulgaria. A unit of Norrath's currency is traded on exchange markets at USD 0.0107, higher than the Yen and the Lira. (Castronova)

The goods produced in persistent worlds are increasingly being traded outside the game itself, predominantly on online auction sites like eBay; the boundaries between persistent world and real world are porous, and corporate speculations on the possibilities of real-world marketing and sales within persistent worlds indicate that they will only become more so. The persistent world game complicates categories of "real" and "imaginary" not only in its economies of trade but in its social economies as well. The previously-cited "A Rape in Cyberspace" by Julian Dibbell, a personal essay on a virtual sexual assault and its consequences in an online multi-user society, has become nigh-canonical in studies of electronically-mediated societies, and, though Dibbell's study was located in the text-based multi-user environment LambdaMOO rather than a persistent world game, these issues have only become more relevant with the social expansion accompanying the advent of persistent world games (see also Suler and Phillips). The persistent world, actively engaged as a society of real participants, challenges in many ways our distinctions between real and fictional or virtual.

It also challenges current ludological understandings of games as art. Games, perhaps even more so than narratives, have a great deal of ontological investment in closure, in met goals or an end state. The endlessness of a persistent world game does not only complicate its "gameness": it, arguably, invalidates it. Scholars Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman label these and similar role-playing games as "limit cases" for existing definitions of games (Salen and Zimmerman 81), while other scholars assert that these persistent worlds are not games at all. This indeterminacy has not daunted economists like Castronova, "embedded journalists" like Dibbell, Richard Ludlow and Wagner James Au, legal scholars like Dan Hunter and Greg Lastowka, nor sociologists like Nicholas Yee, all of whom bring approaches from the social sciences to persistent world games. However, the study of persistent world games as representational (or ergodic) forms is fairly limited. A notable exception is Lisbeth Klastrup, who explicitly states as a goal the inclusion of persistent world games within "the emerging field of 'cybertextual' studies" (Klastrup 100). Klastrup explores a possible poetics of virtual worlds, which acknowledges the role of the persistent world game as a multimodal environment but interprets those modes within a perspective of what one might call a "ludological" poetics. In doing so, she suggests multiple literary functions of a virtual world, arguing that it can be read as a game structure with rule systems, but also as a fictional space or context into which the player projects herself, or as a "lived story" where narratable events are constructed through interaction with other players as well as with the environment (Klastrup 103-04). Using these perspectives, Klastrup researches *EverQuest* with an eye toward its "interpretative framework" or story context, and toward its multiple states of use as a space: performative, social, and as a generator of "narratable" stories (Klastrup 105).

Klastrup's framework provides a good beginning for studying the simulated space of a persistent world; for the purposes of this study, her discussion of the game world as an interpretive framework can be expanded upon. Klastrup argues that the persistent world game "as interpretive framework" refers to the fact that

> From a literary and possible worlds perspective, "games" (and other fictions) conjures [sic] up a fictional universe that we take as a reference point for the understanding of our actions within the world (killing a dragon is interpreted as "killing a dragon", not as the continuous clicking of the mouse on some darkly coloured pixels). (Klastrup 103)

Klastrup, working within the cautious approach to narrative taken by many ludologists, presents *fiction* as her term for describing the representational or imaginary aspects of a persistent world game. This is perhaps, then, an appropriate connection back to a discussion of persistent world games as fiction networks.

PERSISTENT WORLD GAMES AS FICTION NETWORKS

The indeterminacy of a persistent world game as game – the debate over its "gameness" – stems largely from its open-endedness, its lack of an explicit end-state. However, the persistent world game eludes conventional definitions of games in other ways. Most persistent world games contain rule structures identifiable as games: most incorporate agonistic combat systems, but nearly all include systems that encourage and measure the acquisition and accumulation of wealth, experience and skill. These systems, writ large, become economies that privilege those who have invested the most time and effort in accumulating virtual money and virtual power. However, a reading of these economies as games, while partially true, is also a drastic oversimplification, and disregards the emergent complexity these systems display in the face of widespread participation and interaction; describing the economy of a persistent world game as a

contest seems inadequate to describe its nuances, its unpredictable fluctuations, the gaps that arise unforeseen. In addition, the economies of money and skill contained in persistent world games are only a part of the overall system, a component of a virtual world that also contains much more: complex social systems of friendships and affinity groups; narrative structures that encourage role-play and imaginary engagement orthogonal to the rules of the game; spatial and sensory simulations that beg for observation, exploration, and, in some cases, supplement. Even a brief look at the persistent world game as a genre shows that, in many ways, it *exceeds* "gameness" as much as it exceeds or confounds simple concepts of narrative, and, as an environment that provides many different potential experiences – gameplay, role-playing, chat, social networking, the accumulation of "real-world" wealth – the persistent world is a genre that contains many genres within it, one or more of which can be defined as "game." Again, Bakhtin in "The Problem of Speech Genres" identifies primary speech genres as being digested by the novel; here, the persistent world game has absorbed and digested multiple genres not of speech, but of computer-mediated activity – gaming, social, dialogic, and narrative – into one complex simulative space.

In the face of this excess, these definitive qualities of diversity, scope and scale, we can, while maintaining a respect for the persistent world game as a unique form of simulation, attempt to bring *fiction network* forth as a partial descriptor for it. Persistent world games are large-scale, persistent forms whose open-ended, multi-generic properties distinguish them from their more discrete precursors; they are different from other games because they are open and vast systems. A persistent world game is, however, clearly identifiable as a fictional space: a *fiction* because it is a made space that maintains a world with a different truth-value from lived experience (which many persistent world gamers designate with the signifier "r/l," for "real life"). This world's truth-value is not

the same as that of conventional fiction – and this study does not attempt to assert what, exactly, that truth-value is, were that assertion even possible – but no one disputes that the space presented in a persistent world is phenomenologically different from lived experience. As Pavel states, *what* fiction is and *how* we experience it changes over time.

We can conclude that the persistent world, as a fiction, is somewhere between ideals of "real" and "imaginary," as Richard Bartle's epigraph at the beginning of this chapter states. Bartle's definition of "virtual" as a liminal point between "real" and "imaginary" echoes Pavel's description of points of ontological fusion, and Rehak and Consalvo's respective discussions of avatars as representing an "unstable dialectic" speaks similarly to a liminal space where fiction and reception are connected. James Paul Gee, citing his avatar "Bead Bead" in the (non-persistent) game *Arcanum*, further delineates this phenomenon as a tripartite identity of the player-avatar, consisting of:

- *virtual* identity, which emphasizes the avatar as a made thing, its status as a character (in Gee's terms, "James Paul Gee as *Bead Bead"*);
- *real* identity, which emphasizes the player experiencing the game ("*James Paul Gee* as Bead Bead");
- and, *projective* identity, which emphasizes the "real-time" identity of the player engaged with the avatar in the act of play ("James Paul Gee *as* Bead Bead"). (Gee 55-57)

Gee's understanding of the avatarial identity as having three aspects maps well, I think, to a discussion of the persistent world as a fiction network: a space that is fictional experience, real process of ongoing creative production, and rules-based simulation at once. In this, the persistent world begins to present the oscillation of ontological fusion, but that oscillation is complicated by the presence of many voices sharing space: the persistent world, like the comics universe before it, is a communal process of fiction-

making manifested in a fiction. Like the comic universe, the persistent world presents a fiction; however, as a shared simulation, an ongoing act of play rather than a ongoing serial representation, it does not reflect the pressures of communal fiction-making indirectly, nor does it present the process in symbolic terms, in moments of represented material complexity or *mise en abyme*. Rather, the persistent world game must continually accommodate multiple registers of discourse, pertinent to the persistent world game's status as a point of ontological fusion and to its multiple uses as a space.

A story to illustrate: I play *Star Wars Galaxies*, primarily on the server Corbantis, one of several servers that host players of the game. My character on Corbantis is Kyyaraoao, a male Wookiee, who began life as a cantina dancer but is now becoming an accomplished scout, marksman, and animal tamer – a hunter. One morning, I[27] was hunting outside the city of Bestine on Tatooine when I ran into a human scout. He built a camp, and we sat down to rest, heal our wounds and chat. As we conversed, I learned that he lived in Bestine, and in Denmark as well. He then, suddenly, coughed (that is, he used the emote command "/cough" in game).

This cough gave me a short pause. What did it signify? Was he (the "real" he, in Denmark) under the weather? I asked after his health. He replied that it was just the smoke – from the fire, in our camp, outside Bestine. Later, he told me he was a landlord, and tended to a building with a garden. I again had to regauge the context: he was referring to a building in Denmark, not the home in Bestine he had proudly discussed before. He then admired the sunrise as it danced over the sands of Tatooine.

This oscillating mode of conversation is far from uncommon in persistent world games; indeed, oscillation between frames of reference is arguably the very ontology of

[27] To spare readers the tedium of repeatedly reading "I as Kyyaraoao" in this passage, I note here that "I" throughout this anecdote refers to me in a state of avatarial experience.

conversation in persistent world games. Speakers and listeners juggle not only the fictive or narrative framework of the world – ostensibly, the fictional world of *Star Wars* – but also their own lives, outside *Star Wars*, which they share with one another. In addition, they must also accommodate a third register of discourse – the conversation of the game. As the scout and I discussed, as characters, the pleasures and annoyances of our desert environment, and, as players, our lives outside the game, we also discussed, as characters-in-play, the mechanisms of the game: we debated the pleasures and difficulties of gaining experience in our character classes, and I offered to dance for him not in a show of revelry or intimacy, but because dancing in *Star Wars Galaxies* is a healing act that would remedy his character's mind damage. While the phrase *he watches Kyyaraoao dance* in most cases can imply a psychological connection between two players or two characters, in *Star Wars Galaxies* the gaze is primarily born of expediency, not emotion: watching someone dance has a point value, and this act, like "coughing" or "tending house," must be subtly and actively interpreted to resolve its ambiguity of register.

The comic book universe, as we've discussed, performs its history of production in simultaneity with its history of diegesis, indicating the dual presence in moments of *mise en abyme*: structures of representation that acknowledge the multiple levels of history and meaning at play. The persistent world game, like any game, performs both its diegesis (in *Star Wars Galaxies*, the worlds of the Galactic Empire, and the events that shape it) and its process as a simulation (the processes of reaching goals, getting and losing credits and points, maximizing rewards and avoiding penalties) at once, in acts and responses of game play. As a social space, the persistent world also must contain the social relationships among the people who are playing it. That all these relationships overlap and blend on the very level of spoken dialogue speaks to the phenomenological

experience of persistent world gameplay, and suggests that, from a given perspective, understanding a comics universe as an ongoing fiction maintained by a community connects it to a persistent world game as similar phenomena, even as the two forms operate on different levels of activity (reading and fan response vs. gaming/player participation). As the comics universe must engage in the ongoing practice of self-description and self-definition, constructing "continuity" to give itself shape, so the persistent world game must maintain mechanisms for describing itself and showing its players how the space is negotiated. As in the comics universe, scale is an issue: *Star Wars Galaxies* is packaged with a 200-page manual, and that manual is a woefully inadequate resource. As Gee notes, however, one rarely if ever learns a computer game by reading the manual; a game is a situated learning experience that is mastered in the playing (Gee 100-07). In a persistent world game like *Star Wars Galaxies*, this mastery can be achieved through media related to the game (Web sites and message boards, interplayer chat rooms), but it is more often achieved through constant social interaction, through conversation about the game with other players within the game. This practice is ongoing, as each new aspect of the game requires understanding and mastering a new context. Like other computer games, the persistent world game embeds this practice within the game; like the comics universe, the persistent world game is a communal text in an ongoing state of growth, and the embedded conversation and signification within the persistent world indicate not only what the game is, but what it is has been as an entity with a history, and, in addition, what it is in the constant process of becoming.

Scale and open-ended persistence, in texts or macro-texts, result in distinct behaviors, and require distinct internal mechanisms for management. These mechanisms, in persistent world games as in comics universes, must account for the range of experience and interest within the game: they must allow a new player to engage

meaningfully with the fictional world, but must also provide sustained interest for the experienced player. Luckily, in a simulative experience like the persistent world game, there are pleasures beyond narrative or game mastery; indeed, for many players, the primary pleasures of a persistent world game involve social interaction, and a shrewd game designer can implement mentoring systems, in which experienced players lend support to newer players, or other social rule systems in order to create meaningful interaction between the different target players of the game. One of the most successful and popular social templates in persistent world games is that of the *guild*, associations of allied players whose congregation is facilitated by shared avatarial displays, shared opportunities for advancement in the game and shared communication functions. I as Kyyaraoao belong to a guild consisting entirely of Wookiees. This society has established a player city, which has established its own economy (I provide hides to an armorsmith, who produces armor and sells it to warriors, who protect our town from Imperial attack). In addition to our economic interdependence, guild members train each other in various skills (and, in *Star Wars Galaxies*, where the skill system is expansive and flexible, teacher/student interactions are constant and mutable). Guilds are used as interest groups for players with various affinities within the game, and they are also often used as knowledge communities, where less experienced players can learn from more experienced ones in the service of the guild's greater good. In comics fandom, similar social operations happen, but in the sphere of response; social communities, whether physical (the commons of the comic store) or online, serve the purpose of enculturating the group and maintaining a social understanding of the comics universe as an ongoing complex system. In the persistent world game, these communities are also performative communities; they are socially and ergodically operating within the complex system even as they construct social communities in relation to it.

Still, such social structures, however effective, work more as management techniques than solutions, and games like *EverQuest* have had to take supplemental routes to satisfy multiple audiences. In *EverQuest*, this management is more directed toward content; the game establishes ever more challenging spaces for their top-level players while maintaining entry spaces for their new players. This leads, in essence, to multiple games in one space, and *EverQuest* packages and brands its expansions and supplements for experienced players as distinct objects from its base entry game. Where mentorship lends itself toward a more integrated player populace, *EverQuest* has to some extent gone the route of narrowcasting, segmenting its advanced and beginning players into separate (though connected) subspaces within the persistent world.

A scholar of a persistent world game, then, studies a structure that experiences the familiar pressures and behaviors of the comics universe: the negotiation of entry and engagement; the aggregation of complexity balanced against the maintenance of a marketable brand; the interplay of corporate interests and the creative response of the audience; the oscillating manifestation of a fiction and an ongoing process of creation within the same space. However, these issues and behaviors arise in a very different space, and the uniqueness of the persistent world game as game and immersive environment demand not only distinct theoretical considerations, but distinct methodological ones as well.

METHODOLOGY

The study of a persistent world game is more even more challenging than the study of the comics universe, though both make clear the issue of scale that confronts anyone interested in the analysis of a distributed and open-ended macro-text over time. My reading of the DC Universe is, in essence, a social history built upon readings of artifacts or embodiments. I acknowledge the impossibility of "reading" the entire system

and acknowledge that my history is a rhetorical construct, while, at the same time, I recognize my personal advantage as a reader with more than 26 years of experience observing the system. Likewise, a "reading" of a persistent world game is a rhetorical construct, but it is further compromised by the total ephemerality of the form, the problems presented by bringing the concept of "reading" to a game as playable space, and the fact that a persistent world's scale is more one of frequency than amplitude. While the DC Universe is the aggregate product of multiple but discrete serial artifacts generated over decades, persistent world games, though far younger (*Ultima Online*, one of the older graphical persistent world games, debuted in 1997), are also far larger in terms of information generated. These worlds are not embodied, reproducible forms but are the sum of individual fictional moments, experiences of gameplay, thousands upon thousands of which occur every moment of every day that the game is active. No cybertextual experience or ergodic text can be "read" as traditional literary scholarship understands close reading or mastery; as an aggregate text which bears the traces of constant interaction, the persistent world amplifies this quandary exponentially, and reveals the disjunct between narrative and game.

In the face of this, there are a few approaches that can be taken. Again, Frasca suggests studies of simulation rhetoric: analysis of the rule systems that constitute a simulation. We can also read second-order artifacts. Persistent world games often maintain *lore*, the written mythology that informs the persistent world (in Salen and Zimmerman's terms, the embedded narrative), but we can also study the narratives of game play that users and developers generate from their experiences. The Web and other Internet technologies enable players and developers to narrate and share their experiences and histories in media outside the game: message board debates, fan Web sites, game-themed weblogs. These histories can take the form of journalism, critique, or fiction

itself: many mythologies of persistent world games are available on the Web. *Ultima Online*, a persistent world game with a remarkable degree of player loyalty and community coherence, has several rich archives of "game fiction" and fictionalized news, including one hosted by Electronic Arts, the game's owners (Britannia News Network). In a less nurturing context, several "unauthorized" Web resources have emerged from Maxis and Electronic Arts' *The Sims Online* to illustrate that game's social troubles and community reaction to those troubles, from the weblog/tabloid news site *The Alphaville Herald* to homepages for their in-game "mafias" and "shadow governments[28]." As Dan Hunter says of the *Alphaville Herald* and other second-order artifacts in persistent world games:

> In years to come social historians, theorists, statisticians, economists, etc etc etc will all give thanks for resources such as these: deeply embedded accounts of what actually happens in-world. As Ted [Castronova] has noted elsewhere, it's really really hard to do research in these worlds, because they're so opaque to non-participant investigation. (Hunter)

However, while secondary sources are useful, they can only act as part of the research; James Paul Gee would most likely argue that, as a persistent world is both a site of situated and embodied cognition and the nexus of a social system or affinity group, a persistent world game must be played, and its social groups joined, in order to be understood, and Aarseth, from the evidence of his "Playing Research," would doubtlessly agree (Aarseth, "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis").

Given these precedents, the analysis of the game *Star Wars Galaxies* that comprises most of the remainder of this chapter will focus primarily on two sources: 1) out-of-game, but associated, online resources, from the rich archive of materials available on official game Web sites (Star Wars Galaxies), to community resources for *Star Wars*

[28] Located at http://www.alphavilleherald.com (The Alphaville Herald), http://www.thesimmafia.com (The Sim Mafia), and http://www.simshadow.com (Simulated Shadow Government).

Galaxies on popular "massively multiplayer" game sites like Stratics (Star Wars Galaxies Stratics) or Warcry (Star Wars Galaxies Warcry); and 2), my own hours of play as Kyyaraoao, a Wookiee learning the ins and outs of dancing, hunting, crafting, trading and socializing in the midst of galactic civil war. Though my experience in a network of such scale cannot be totalized to represent the system as a whole – I have not yet, for instance, made any attempt to take on a Jedi profession, a time-consuming and controversial process I will discuss in some detail – my accreted experience within the game is a needed supplement to a reading of materials that, while rich with metatextual commentary on the system as a whole, become like Gee's proverbial manual, dead and unreadable, without the gameplay required to give it context.

While this method is, I believe, a good approach for my goals – introducing the conceptual, theoretical and logistical issues relevant to persistent world games as branded yet emergent persistent fictions, influenced by rule structures, corporate desires and player/consumer reactions – I also believe that there are clear indicators that approaches traditionally associated with the social sciences – specifically, case study and ethnography – should be considered as methods for analyzing persistent world games more specifically and comprehensively. I will discuss this in further detail in the concluding chapter of this study.

STAR WARS GALAXIES

Star Wars Galaxies, a joint production of LucasArts (the computer games arm of Lucasfilm) and Sony Online Entertainment, was publicly released on June 26, 2003, after nearly a year of beta testing (testing by a discrete number of volunteers before the game is released as a retail product). The game allows the player to build a character from one of several interplanetary races, including humans and Wookiees, and to interact in a

fictional space consisting currently of 10 worlds (planets or inhabitable moons). As an avatar in this space, the player builds experience in dozens of available skill areas or professions, participates in an active, player-based economy, and can choose to join a side in the Galactic Civil War between the Empire and the Rebellion. The game opened to mixed reviews and some notably harsh criticism, but the mechanics of a persistent world game make any evaluation of it here as a success or failure somewhat dubious; the persistent world game is always in progress, with regular fixes to open software errors or issues ("bugs"), feature enhancements, and new content released to the system frequently[29]. Estimates for the current subscriber base for *Star Wars Galaxies* vary; though "the most conservative estimates of Galaxies' stable player base estimates approximately 100,000 active players" according to Gamespy.com (Rausch and Kosak, "The Saga of Star Wars Galaxies: Episode I (of Iii)"), most other estimates place the subscriber base closer to 300,000 in number (Dibbell, Swg $300 (and Plummeting)).

As a persistent world game, *Star Wars Galaxies* follows many of the conventions of this young genre while including some of its own innovations. The game presents as its core game goal the accretion of experience and skill: it presents a wide array of beginning and advanced professions, all of which involve different actions, abilities, and potentialities. Unlike many other persistent world games, this system is flexible: I began Kyyaraoao as an entertainer, who danced for patrons in cantinas. Though entertainers perform a key economic role in *Galaxies* (only recreation through entertainment can heal "mind wounds" and "battle fatigue," so an entertainer enables the mental health of the community), I quickly found that, in terms of gameplay, it wasn't my cup of tea. Though other games would have required me to discard Kyyaraoao and begin a new avatar, *Star*

[29] Minor updates to the game happen in the background, while major updates in *Star Wars Galaxies* are packaged and communicated to the player community in what are called "publishes"; as of early March 2004, the development team was preparing to roll out the seventh such "publish."

Wars Galaxies allows a player to "change jobs" midstream and to experiment with occupations: Kyyaraoao is currently trained at various levels in five occupations. The flexible professions system acts as a corrective against exhaustion of interest – a player can dabble in several roles in the game, finding her or his preferred one and experiencing a range of gameplay. This system of advancement implies a recognition that a player's time spent with a character is currency in persistent world games; unlike skill or speed based games – first-person shooters like *Quake*, for example – success in a persistent world game comes not with the development of technique or coordination with the interface and controller, but rather with the accretion of experience and familiarity with the game's parameters and economy over time. The core point system of advancement in many of the games, "experience points," speaks to the value of accumulated time and experience spent in the game. Often (though not always), these systems operate on inertia; it becomes easier to accumulate experience after an initial investment of time.

A persistent world game therefore rewards the aggregation of information, embodied as a player's wealth, skill, renown, and contributions to the economy (for every character, regardless of profession, contributes fictional goods and services to the overall economy). It rewards engagement, and *Star Wars Galaxies* in particular allows a player to leverage engagement while retaining freedom of direction and choice. As Kyyaraoao, I am able to explore new avenues of experience – to stave off exhaustion with the fiction – while retaining the wealth, property, guild associations and reputation I have accumulated over time. Writ large, the flexible professions system is an argument for continuity: it makes the aggregation of experience and wealth around one avatar (as opposed to many) more engaging and less repetitious over time. Consider the alternative: were I as Kyyaraoao limited to my initial choice of cantina dancing, I may have spent a little more time developing that experience before abandoning the avatar in frustration

and creating a new one. That new avatar would have none of the in-game money, experience, or relationships Kyyaraoao had, nor none of the consequent mobility and society. Like a comic book character that is revised for a new entrant audience (the "new" Buddy Baker, for example, in my analysis of *Animal Man*), the new avatar would offer a fresh experience, but would demand the denial of my gaming history as symbolized by Kyyaraoao, a character who is now of some age and experience. Such a "reboot" disrupts not only my gameplay; if too frequent in the game, this practice impedes the social and economic relationships that require experienced and skilled characters. If this analysis sounds like a strange blend of literary study, sociology and economics, it is because the space of the persistent world itself manifests behaviors that map to all these disciplines: as a virtual space, it presents a social world, but just as prominently displays a fiction.

This virtual blurring of the real and fictional finds its liminal point in the figues of the user interface and avatar. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the game upon first experience is the complexity of its interface. As an immersive persistent world environment, *Star Wars Galaxies* presents a rendered, graphical digital world to the player and gives one the option of experiencing that world from a first-person perspective (which allows one to navigate the world through the position of the avatar) or from an "over-the-shoulder" third-person perspective (which allows one to navigate from a position proximate to the avatar). At the same time that the game presents a graphical and immersive representation of a fictional space to the player, however, it presents a great number more interfaces besides. Using the metaphor of a "holocron," a digital computing and communication device, *Star Wars Galaxies* presents dozens of "screens," each with dedicated functions related to the game: a "planetary map" of one's environment, a character sheet with details about one's avatar, a skills sheet that allows

one to track avatarial progress in multiple professions. These windows all pertain to the game, but many perform functions identical to programs in a standard desktop computer configuration: there is a chat interface with a "friends list," an in-game email interface, an extensive help module, social software and networking modules, even a "bazaar" interface which allows the user access to the game's trade economy (a system notably similar to eBay). These interfaces perform, in-game, social functions that echo out-of-game Internet functions; they are fictionalized representations of communication systems that are themselves termed virtual.

To reiterate a point made in the second chapter of this study: *genre* as presented in this work encompasses not only form-shaping ideologies of narrative. There are genres of technology that shape the tools we use; genres of software that inform our understandings of and expectations for an email program, an instant messaging program, a Web browser. These patterns of genre are clearly evoked in various interfaces – for mail, messaging, auction and trade – within *Star Wars Galaxies*, and their presence in *Star Wars Galaxies* speaks to *Galaxies* as a multi-generic space, in a similar fashion to the presence of various popular narrative or topical genres in the comics universe that designate it as a multi-generic space. Though the modes of genre are very different, both modes are situated within their respective forms to maximize opportunities for reader or player interest and engagement; in both cases, they are engines of novelty. Persistent world games from generations previous to *Star Wars Galaxies*, such as *EverQuest*, initially offered far fewer genres of interface and fewer modes of use, and then added new modes as time goes on, to the point where the game interfaces approach a "fictional desktop." *EverQuest* has, in the fairly recent past, even added an MP3 player to its in-game interface (Play Your Favorite Mp3s in Game)

Fiction networks generate a diversity of genres to drive their forward progress and maximize points of entry and engagement for consumers. In this context, "true crime" as a topical genre and "instant messaging" as a technological genre serve similar goals: while one mobilizes a tradition of storytelling to maintain a sense of novelty or engagement for a reader, the other mobilizes a tradition of computational use to encourage a similar sense for the game player. In addition, genres of *gameplay* can also be multiplied and mobilized to accommodate many modes of use. The non-persistent game series *Grand Theft Auto* is frequently cited as a presence in the "canon" of computer game development, and its most frequently-cited virtue is "freedom." Its freedom of ethics, or perhaps *from* ethics, is its most infamous component, and the source of much controversy. However, the later-generation games in the series, *Grand Theft Auto III* and *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, offer remarkable freedom in terms of the ergodic uses that can be made of the spaces represented. A player can follow the series of missions presented and engage with an ergodic discourse of organized crime; however, she or he can also diverge significantly, and take on the work of a cab driver or a firefighter. One can even savor the opportunity to joyride and interact with the radio interface, another technological genre represented in the *GTA* game space:

> It's here, I think, that the game will most connect with its audience. Ripping through the rain-slick streets with the Cult's "She Sells Sanctuary" blasting, or coming over a bridge that takes you downtown, where the skyscrapers rise up to meet you, just as Talk Talk's "Life's What You Make It" comes on -- you may remember similar times when you wheeled your parents' sedan around to the same music, as you thought about the future, all night endlessly gliding. *Vice City* is the first nostalgia sim. (Au, "It's Fun to Kill Guys Wearing Acid-Wash and Members Only Jackets!")

This review "reads" *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* as a text that can generate very different responses (prosaic, nostalgic) from those evoked by its *Scarface*-esque primary narrative. Though the game's path of scripted crime missions is the richest in content, and

unambiguously the "main thread" of play, it shares space with other rule systems and structures, different genres of games. The multi-generic complexity is greatly amplified – and, by virtue of persistence, always subject to expansion and revision – in the persistent world game, where, as I mentioned earlier, "game" is perhaps best understood as a signifier for one or more of the many genres that can be distinguished in a persistent virtual world.

A few of these forms in persistent world games, like *EverQuest'*s MP3 player, intrude into the persistent world game's fiction, but most reify it[30]. The various genres of gameplay allow many players to gain pleasure in exploration, problem-solving, or competition within the simulated space, while the technological genres present information about the fictional space, or allow the building of social bonds within the space. Out-of-game messages do not intrude into the *Star Wars Galaxies* chat or email interfaces, and the bazaar trades only in objects generated within the fictional world. These instances of genres are artifacts that mediate the world as a fictional space with its own social and economic structures, and they encourage a wide range of approaches to gameplay and registers of discourse while at the same time circumscribing these many genres within the wide umbrella of the branded network. At the same time, the branded network *Star Wars Galaxies* occupies its own space as an artifact within a larger system.

PERSISTENT WORLD GAMES WITHIN FICTION NETWORKS

Beyond the internal behaviors and mechanisms of complexity and aggregated meaning relevant to persistent world games in general, there are a series of external pressures unique to persistent world games that extend larger branded properties or

[30] Some even attempt to extend it: the persistent world *Second Life*, for example, is currently developing mechanisms for sending in-game messages to out-of-game email clients.

fiction networks, such as *Star Wars Galaxies*, the focus game of this chapter. Like the DC Universe, *Star Wars* relies on an elaborate and detailed preexisting continuity, from which *Galaxies* is conceived as an organic extension. Clearly, from the marketing language cited at the beginning of the chapter, *Star Wars Galaxies* is not merely a genre-inflected space vaguely associated with the cosmology of *Star Wars*: it "lets you live the movies with thousands of other players," and has a specific spatial and temporal location within the overall network of *Star Wars* (as of early 2004, *Star Wars Galaxies* is simulating the time period immediately after the plot events of "Episode 4: A New Hope," the first *Star Wars* film). At the same time, the game is an ongoing simulation that Aarseth would classify as transient: time is passing in *Star Wars Galaxies*, outside of any one user's experience of it. The game has changed significantly in the time since I began writing this sentence. *Star Wars Galaxies*, then, must continually reconcile its own inevitable systemic and chronotopic progress with its required temporal and narrative fidelity to a story that is not only fully defined, but defined to a significant level of detail.

Salen and Zimmerman, in their *Rules of Play*, delineate embedded and emergent narrative (and context-dependence) in games (Salen and Zimmerman 382-85). Fiction networks, arguably, always display a similar division of narrative elements: embedded story truths or elements (narremes) are deployed, but grow and take on accreted meanings as the persistent system of creators and consumers influence the ongoing development of the macro-text in a process of emergent narrative. A licensed persistent world game like *Star Wars Galaxies*, unlike a non-persistent licensed role-playing game (such as, for instance, the popular *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*) must manage the consequences of its ongoing emergent narrative. One of the qualities most often noted in gaming is the ability to play iteratively, to stop and start over (Frasca 227). The persistent world game, by definition, does not allow this luxury; even on the individual

level, a death leaves a trace and must be managed within a shared space that cannot be "reset."[31] On a larger scale, a persistent world accumulates meaning that it cannot easily shed or ignore; it is an emergent system that becomes something new and unique. In *Star Wars Galaxies*, I as Kyyaraoao have built a home in the Rebel "player city" of Kashyyykur, on the moon of Rori on the server Corbantis. Kashyyykur is a bustling community created, expanded, and maintained entirely by players, with a guild hall, a cantina, a city hall, community meetings and events, and a Rebel outpost in development. Though the building blocks of player-city definition – schematics for buildings, rules of incorporation – have been designated for player cities by the developers, the work of creation belongs outside of the developers' hands: players made Kashyyykur, and the persistent world in which it exists is changed for it. Again, like comics universes, this property of emergent narrative consequent to persistence must coexist with the demands of stasis or stability a brand presents, despite the two properties' fundamental contradictions. As in comics universes, this tension is both necessary to the persistent world game as an entity and a fundamental problem of it; though *Star Wars Galaxies* is a young game, it has already been forced to confront issues where the evolution of the game must be reconciled with the demands of the brand and the larger narrative, as we will see later.

There are mechanisms to mitigate this; for example, many games employ multi-server instancing, where multiple servers or "shards" can, potentially, satisfy multiple interest groups. As I mentioned, I do not just play *Star Wars Galaxies*; I play *Star Wars Galaxies* on the server Corbantis, one of (as of this writing) 26 servers maintained by Sony. My membership within the community of the game is better represented as a

[31] Jonathan Glater's *New York Times* article "50 First Deaths" explores this issue of persistent world games in more detail (Glater).

membership in a subset of the community – the Corbantis community. Servers are added as new players fill existing server capacity, so newer servers tend to host newer players, and the accreted experience of one server does not necessarily have to affect another. While narrative synchronicity is generally maintained across all servers (story events happen similarly within all of them), the economies and social systems have their own levels of experience and engagement.

Another solution is to avoid unnecessary brand entanglements, or to brand strategically. The multiplayer virtual world *Second Life* owes no allegiance to a larger brand identity, and is able to sell itself, its own dynamism: it brands itself with the qualities of positive indeterminacy and change. However, *Second Life* is also a smaller community, whose goals are different from the mass-market penetration gained through the use of a branded entertainment property. Such a mass-market penetration is usually necessary to achieve the persistent world game's economy of scale:

> Christopher Taylor, the Vivendi producer for *Middle Earth Online*, also lists audience appeal as a big factor when considering the business of marketing an MMOG. "The advantages of licensed properties… are a lot like the advantages of licenses in traditional games," he says. "You get to play in well-known worlds… and you can get a lot more people to look at your game. … Having a well-known name on your box means it's easier to sell it to the retailers and more likely you will have a casual shopper pick up the box." (Kosak)

Persistent world games are expensive to create and maintain, prohibitively so if a sufficient subscriber base cannot be found, and the subscriber base is, by nearly all accounts, limited; there are issues with economies of scale and attention alike.

> Most of these games will fail for several prosaic reasons -- not the least of which is an unavoidable fact of life: The hardcore gamers who make these games successful can usually obsess over only one game at a time. There are only so many hours in a week, after all, and MMORPGs are nothing if not massively time-consuming. (For this very reason, says Cole, "I think there is room for only a handful of these games in each genre.") And because many gamers have long since established a social network on established MMORPGs, it's unclear how

> these new titles can lure them away. (Au, "Showdown in Cyberspace: Star Wars Vs. The Sims")

So, like the expensive blockbuster movie, the persistent world game is a fairly high-risk venture, which appeals more as a project when coupled to a reputable brand (Bray). This negotiation between a persistent world game and a larger fiction network is then, not an aberration but, likely, the most common pattern of development[32]: currently, *Star Wars Galaxies*, *Disney's Toontown Online*, *Final Fantasy XI* and *The Sims Online* all leverage the brand equity of a larger entertainment property (including game properties), while *Middle-Earth Online, The Matrix Online, Marvel Universe* and *World of Warcraft* are all in various stages of development. With such a strategy, the only apparent guarantee is that, with user participation more immediate, public, and larger in scale, these persistent worlds will almost inevitably move the larger narrative of a multiple-media universe or other property to places that the designers – or marketers – did not account for, and the fictional system of the persistent world will need to not only be initiated but actively maintained and managed, either through "top-down" or "bottom-up" methods.

The Sims Online provides a good example of such emergent narrative going far astray of original intentions. Its single-player precursor, *The Sims*, succeeded by allowing players to create and maintain characters in a suburban milieu leavened by kitsch, irony, and touches of fantasy: robots and genies could coexist with homemaking in the space of the game through a safe mixing of genres reminiscent of offbeat situation comedies, like *Bewitched* or *My Favorite Martian*. Surely the presumption on the part of Will Wright, the "auteur" of *The Sims* and *The Sims Online*, and of Maxis, the producing

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[32] A notable exception which , in the end, perhaps proves the rule is *EverQuest,* which succeeded as a persistent world game without a pre-existing brand. It also, however, entered a far less competitive market 5 years ago, and benefited from the marketing support of Sony. *EverQuest* has now become a brand in itself, one whose equity is leveraged to support the release of new games (such as, predictably, the upcoming *EverQuest 2*)

company of both, was that *The Sims Online* would be a positive amplification of these themes on an emergent scale: Wright himself cites Epcot Center as an inspiration for *TSO* as an active utopian system (Levine).

What has emerged from *The Sims Online*, however, evokes memories of darker social experiments: the environment, mobilizing idyllic suburbia as its embedded narrative or fictional world, implements minimal structures of policing and control, and its primary mechanism for community self-policing, a reputation system where players rate one another as trustworthy or abject, has been exploited as an extortion tool by groups of players. In the face of this manipulation of reputation as the foundation of its social economy, *The Sims Online* has generated its own communities of control, self-described in the most renowned cases as "The Sim Mafia" and "The Sim Shadow Government." The emergent narrative of *The Sims Online* has generated virtual extortion, conspiracy, vice, and theft, and one could argue that these emergences speak not only as reactions to an imperfect social infrastructure but also an imperfect fictional structure: that these emergent mechanisms of control not only attempt to balance an unbalanced system, but do so using popular genres of "true-crime" and conspiracy, indicates that *The Sims Online*'s community needs not only the policing which the game lacked as developed, but elements of drama it lacked as well. Our cultural understanding of situation comedy and domesticity in fiction has evolved considerably from the late 1950s and early 1960s[33], and the players of *The Sims Online* have mandated the integration of new and more engaging genres into the environment, genres the corporation did not propose and has not officially acknowledged.

[33] It seems fitting that "The Sim Mafia" emerges within a suburban simulation at the same time that the suburban gangster drama *The Sopranos* was a cultural phenomenon for television viewers. The self-declared leader of "The Sim Mafia" has named his game avatar "JC Soprano."

This tension between emergent, player-defined narrative and the corporate narremes of the larger network is particularly relevant to *Star Wars Galaxies,* a game emerging from a fiction network that has historically manifested debates about continuity, control, and the relationship between its creators and its reception community. As it extends to *Galaxies*, these threads of debate currently coalesce around the debate over the role of Jedi Knights in *Star Wars Galaxies,* a debate we will look at in more detail.

STAR WARS AND *GALAXIES*

Again, *Star Wars Galaxies* occupies a problematic position as a network within a network; it is a large-scale simulation with clear allegiance to a established fiction system, and, in its marketing, attempts to elide the inevitable gaps and discontinuities that arise from the same narremes being deployed across radically different representational or ergodic forms. In addition, *Star Wars* as a corporate system has its own history of complex and contested communal dynamics. In his ethnography of *Star Wars'* fan community, *Using the Force*, Will Brooker investigates the evolution of *Star Wars* as a phenomenon with a widespread reception community and locates some key debates and tensions within that community, as well as between it and Lucasfilm, the corporate producer of *Star Wars* as a multimedia entertainment property (Brooker, Using the Force: Creativity, Community and *Star Wars* Fans).

Two themes within Brooker's text are relevant to this argument. The first is the relationship between George Lucas and Lucasfilm and the various communities that have coalesced around the intellectual property of *Star Wars*. Brooker's study details the mechanisms of control Lucasfilm has employed over the past several years to police the distribution and recombination of its intellectual property; it also studies *Star Wars*

Episode 1: The Phantom Menace as a controversial film through which, and in reaction to which, Lucasfilm and long-time fans of the universe communicated what shape *Star Wars* has or should have, and what their respective roles are within the fiction network as a system that maintains a mythos.

The second theme Brooker analyzes involves "canon" in the *Star Wars* universe and the continuum from which it is constructed and expanded. The *Star Wars* canon consists of multiple groups of texts that occupy a hierarchy of validity; the original movie trilogy, in their Special Edition formats, and the two extant "prequels" constitute core canon or the "most true" texts, while the "Expanded Universe" of books, comics, animations, games and other ancillary products occupy a position of secondary canon, true unless found to be in conflict with the primary canon of the films. Crucial to this process of canonicity, however, is Lucasfilm's own proactive maintenance of a canon.

> In contrast to their Hollywood counterparts, the people who run *Star Wars* don't consider novels, toys, comic books, and videogames to be promotional vehicles that exist merely to stoke the box office and pad the bottom line. They consider these products to be shards of an alternate reality; each must be rigorously checked against all the others, lest it break continuity.
>
> As a result, the licensing division of Lucasfilm has become a sort of secular clergy, whose principal function is to interpret the *Star Wars* oeuvre (more commonly called "the canon" by Lucas employees, without a trace of irony) whenever someone wants to add onto it. Licensing maintains a 25,000-entry FileMaker Pro database, distilled from every scrap of media the company has produced, plus an archive of imagery, all of which is made available to employees and licensees on a corporate intranet. This database is, for all intents and purposes, the *Star Wars* bible, to which all functional, aesthetic, and metaphysical queries are referred. (Herz)

Unlike the DC Universe, where the discrepancies and fissures in the corpus of aggregate artifacts are so significant that "continuity" is implicitly understood as a contingent reading or, more accurately, misreading of the system for the sake of forward serial

progress, the *Star Wars* universe very much operates as if there is an unambiguous internal truth of the fiction that can be interpreted from the body of texts in the "Expanded Universe." This is not to say that *Star Wars* as a mythos contains no discrepancies, but rather that the system Lucasfilm has in place has heretofore successfully resolved these discrepancies, and has elided the uncertainties implicit in such resolutions; they have successfully maintained a myth of unproblematic canon internal to the fictional world of *Star Wars*. In the face of this, the very existence of *Star Wars Galaxies* seems like a death blow to the "secular clergy" of Lucasfilm: its insinuation into the overall system of the fiction immediately presents questions of canonicity and continuity.

> Even as the new *Star Wars* testament is checking itself against the old, though, the game is feeding new information into the canon. For instance, in the films you glimpse only small sections of any given planet. But because the game realm has to be traversed, all those known areas must be connected, and it's up to the builders to generate new terrain. The maps are then uploaded to the Ranch and become permanent planetary surveys. "That will happen with everything," says Blackman, in a just-the-facts-ma'am tone that barely veneers his deep-seated zeal. "Every time we create a new character, a new creature, a new location, every time we include an event, those become part of continuity. Already, we've created several hundred creatures, and they're all now established in the continuity as native to whatever planet they're on."
>
> This conjuring exercise is similar to what George Lucas and his monster builders did 25 years ago with the original movie. Yet in one fundamental way it is radically different: Not everything is under the gamemaker's control. The characters in *Galaxies* will not be actors, or passages in a novel, or drawings in a comic book. They'll be autonomous human beings, hundreds of thousands of them, with minds, egos, and agendas of their own. (Herz)

To put it vividly (if somewhat facilely), if Lucasfilm can be read as a secular clergy with governance of *Star Wars* up to the point of *Galaxies*' debut, then *Galaxies* can be read as a cybertextual Protestantism: the granting of ergodic access to the mythology to hundreds of thousands of consumers. *Galaxies* should not be over-interpreted as a "liberator" of the

fiction; the space of the persistent world game has its own mechanisms of control, and playing a game is not the same as creating it. However, *Galaxies* destabilizes the unity and control advertised by Lucasfilm in fundamental ways; it is, as a part of *Star Wars*, explicitly branded and "canonical," and is also, as a persistent world game, explicitly a locus of unpredictable emergent narrative. *Star Wars Galaxies* as a fiction network contains powerful and contradictory internal impulses: the need to maintain the coherence of *Star Wars* as a story versus the need to satisfy player need for the indeterminacy of play, the need to imply a dynamic system and the need to maintain a causal and temporal stasis. The fundamental systemic tension we have identified in previous fiction networks, between the stability of a aggregate of narremes or cardinal functions (the brand) and the indeterminacy and dynamism of narrative progress, appears again here, and does so with a particular volatility.

Star Wars Galaxies is less than a year past its public release, and has up to this point had little problem managing these tensions by maintaining an indeterminacy of time. Though, as we've mentioned before, *Star Wars Galaxies* as a game occurs soon after the events of *Star Wars Episode 4: A New Hope*, and though the official *Star Wars* timeline is very clearly defined (*The Empire Strikes Back* occurs, diegetically, three years after *A New Hope,* and *Return of the Jedi* occurs one year after *Empire*), *Star Wars Galaxies* currently exists in a vague and temporally oneiric state: despite online posts from developers that assert ongoing efforts to tie gameplay "into the Star Wars continuity and ongoing saga," and player desires to see the famous battles of Hoth and Endor from the movie sequels, there are no official plans to reach those moments in the game. As currently designed, the game is and shall presumably remain indefinitely located somewhere between the first two movies of the saga. Within *Star Wars Galaxies*, the sun rises and sets, the economy grows, and the Rebellion and the Empire alike enjoy victories

and suffer setbacks, but there are no public plans for this emergent narrative to progress as the larger narrative of *Star Wars* does, despite the game's being presented as an experience of "living the movies." Like everything else in a persistent world game, its chronotopic perspective is very much subject to change, and there is clearly an interest from many parties, developer and player alike, in bringing subsequent narrative events from the *Star Wars* universe to the game. However, this vagueness with respect to time will remain, I think, necessary. Given that closer ties between the trilogy and the game might generate more questions about canonicity, an oneiric approach to time in the game would likely continue to be the preferred, most tenable solution.

It is certainly more manageable than the work of managing two distinct chronotopes – that of the "Expanded Universe" and that of *Galaxies* – which are, perhaps, fundamentally irreconcilable. The issue is more fundamental than synchronicity of in-game and out-of-game narrative events; as an open process of gameplay, *Galaxies* operates on multiple registers and "corrupts" the representational clarity of *Star Wars* with the mechanics of navigating a simulation, as this humorous message board post illustrates:

> Luke confronting Vader at Bespin, the real reason he confronted Vader was really to get all that uber-XP, he should've formed a group and went... but he got greedy and decided to solo. Also, off camera near the end he told Leia he should've stopped at one of the cantina's [sic] on Bespin before the battle to remove some hellish battle fatigue he forgot to get rid of after the Wampa attack on Hoth, and the Imperial assault. (JustusCade)

Even as it attempts to extend the fictional space of the "Expanded Universe," *Star Wars Galaxies* operates as a simulation, generates multiple modes of register, and cannot abide the illusion of uncomplicated immersion, or inviolable fiction. The game is, then, marketed as an entry point in the fiction, but it cannot allow any "synchronicity" with the larger multiple-media universe without deeply compromising the structure of *Star Wars*

both as a canon and as a fictional timeline presented to readers and cinema-goers. However, despite its possible necessity, this strangeness and indeterminacy of time in *Star Wars Galaxies*, as in the comics universe, is becoming and, I believe, will continue to grow as a source of tension within the system of the game and of its reception: the fundamental tensions of a fiction network cannot be solved, only continually negotiated, and *Galaxies* is no exception. Although this game is less than a year old as an active consumer product, these tensions are already making themselves manifest in debate, and this debate is, perhaps predictably, carried within the terminology of "continuity." "Continuity" is here, as before, a signifier that represents not merely the story of the fiction network "as it really is," but also the gaps and conflicts that arise as a corporate producer and a reception community struggle to create and maintain that contingent story. Following the ludological thread we introduced earlier, it seems useful to discuss specifically how this struggle has coalesced around rules of the game, specifically, the rules that define what a Jedi Knight is in the game, and what a Jedi's influence can be.

EVERYBODY WANTS TO BE A JEDI

A strong argument can be made for *Star Wars Galaxies'* success. Among persistent world games, the size of its player base is second in North America only to *EverQuest*, and even its critics agree that most of its key aspects – its player economy, its profession system, its vivid rendering of its planetscapes – are innovative and successful. However, there is a vocal and active discourse, on gaming Web sites and *Star Wars Galaxies* community boards – such as SWG Stratics, SWG Warcry, and the official Starwarsgalaxies.com – that actively critique the game and challenge it on its shortcomings. While these critiques should be understood qualitatively rather than quantitatively – as the feedback of a discrete and limited group of players within a far

larger subscriber base – they have come to dominate much public dialogue about the game on the Web, and one topic of debate in particular – concerning the rules and structures which govern the path of the Jedi Knight in the game, and the *Star Wars Galaxies* development team's representation of those rules and structures – has become prominent and detailed enough to merit external coverage from popular gaming sites like Gamespy.com. This topic is of interest here because it can be read as a point where the common pressures we have identified in fiction networks – stability of the brand, narremes, or cardinal functions; meaningful narrative progress; and, the negotiation of the two through "continuity" – have an active and critical presence, and make themselves manifest "ludologically" in a rule system and in a "meta-rule" discussion about what a set of rules mean, and how they can be changed.

Upon beginning *Star Wars Galaxies*, the player has many options as far as avatar customization goes: she may choose from 8 races and 6 starting professions, and may customize every variable of appearance from height to chin length. She cannot, however, take on what may be the most famous of *Star Wars* professions; she cannot, at least not initially, become a Jedi Knight. The Jedi profession[34] is a hidden profession in the game, which is "unlocked" through a process of discovery and in-game accrual of experience, as follows[35]:

A player who wishes to become a Jedi Knight must unlock a Force-sensitive character slot (FSCS) for the game. This character slot, when unlocked, which enables her to create a new, Force-sensitive character. This character has the ability to become a Jedi Padawan (Apprentice) and, eventually, a Jedi Master. The process for unlocking

[34] As of March 2004, the development team, as I mention later, is revising the rules governing the Jedi profession, and indicates that the system will become based on quests rather than the mastering of various professions.

[35] Information here is aggregated from multiple sources: swg.stratics.com, swg.warcry.com, starwarsgalaxies.com.

one's FSCS is not fully documented, but involves both the discovery of rare "Holocrons" that communicate to the player the steps she must take, and the mastering of many disparate professions available in the game, from Creature Handler to Armorsmith to Dancer. In other words, the FSCS rewards a breadth of experience with the game: its recipients have worn many hats and, presumably, are more aware of a range of game experiences because of their path, as *Star Wars Galaxies* Producer for LucasArts Haden Blackman confirms:

> (The) goal was to have players who attained Jedi characters be well-rounded, with experience playing different professions ... we wanted players to explore other professions in the hopes that they would discover other playstyles that they enjoy (and indeed, we are receiving feedback from some players that this has been the case). (Rausch and Kosak, "The Saga of Star Wars Galaxies: Episode Ii (of Iii)")

Once a Force-sensitive character is unlocked or created, that character must follow a difficult path: the Jedi-in-training must build a lightsaber from expensive materials and keep her skills covert, as Jedi are valuable prey in the game for players with Bounty Hunter and similar avatar professions. In addition, the rules of consequence and penalty for a Jedi are far more stringent than those for other players; while most players can return from a "death" with little loss of penalty through the use of a "cloning station," a Jedi loses some skills after a set number of deaths (and, until very recently, risked losing that character altogether to "permadeath"). Suffice it to say that a player who wishes to become a Jedi Knight undertakes an in-game quest which is difficult, long, individualized and more than a little vague.

Long before the release of *Star Wars Galaxies*, the development team established that all this was intentional: in accordance with the movies, in which Jedi are rare and pivotal, the game would restrict the number of Jedi through mechanics of difficulty, challenge and mystery. This appeal to "continuity," however, also serves the game

balance: persistent world games are studied by economists because they create social and financial economies of considerable scale and complexity. The introduction of a Jedi, a being of superior competitive power, into this economy could radically disrupt it:

> The Jedi are the consummate warrior/magician class -- and their enormous power makes them a magnet for power-gamers. Needless to say, Jedi couldn't be commonplace: it's not only against the *Star Wars* mythos, but it's really scary from a game design perspective. Nothing would ruin the *Star Wars* experience faster than a couple of Jedi "L33T kids" with nigh unstoppable powers and the ability to cause grief for every other player in the game. (Rausch and Kosak, "The Saga of Star Wars Galaxies: Episode Ii (of Iii)")

Even from a decontextualized reading of these rules, it is hopefully obvious that they are well-designed to prevent the creation of casual Jedi. Unfortunately, though, they have also proven a source of considerable consternation for those players who wish to take on the "Jedi Quest," and those players have made their frustration known, both within the game and without.

In his online analysis of the issue, Allen Rausch characterizes the Jedi debate as a debate between two emphases in persistent world games: a role-playing emphasis, which focuses on the construction of a coherent identity within a fictional space, and a "power-playing" emphasis, which focuses on the accumulation of power and skills within the game space. The introduction of the Jedi in *Star Wars Galaxies*, according to the article, responds to the demands of "power players," who want to experience a greater level of competitive achievement than the initial, "role-player" centered focus of *Star Wars Galaxies* could provide (Rausch and Kosak, "The Saga of Star Wars Galaxies: Episode I (of Iii)"). However, the Jedi debate manifests, in my opinion, desires and frustrations not only born from the players' genre expectations for persistent world gameplay but also, crucially, the generic expectations brought to *Star Wars Galaxies* as an extension of the universe of *Star Wars*.

"Continuity" here not only speaks to a coherence of the narrative across multiple artifacts; but specifically to a fidelity *Galaxies* must hold to key narremes that make a text identifiable as part of *Star Wars.* Former Lead Designer of *Galaxies* Raph Koster, interestingly enough, seems to acknowledge the divergences through emergent narrative inevitable to a structure like *Star Wars Galaxies*, but at the same time emphasizes the universe the game shares:

> Technically, we are able to diverge from the continuity over time, of course, as the players impact the world, but we do have the Star Wars continuity as a starting point. Our producer at LucasArts, Haden Blackman, is also our continuity supervisor, and he's a walking Star Wars encyclopedia. We run all content by him, everything from the floorplans of buildings to Prefect Talmont's first name. We use the movies (even including deleted scenes!), the novels, the comics, the cartoons, the roleplaying game, other computer and video games, and even the lunchboxes as source material.
>
> As far as limiting — yes, of course it can be limiting. On the other hand, it's also freeing, in a way. As an analogy, I'd offer up the artist who has the choice of every possible medium there is — gouache, oil, crayons, collage, sculpture, whatever — versus the artist who is handed a palette of watercolors and a 12x12 sheet of paper. There's a lot to be said for being the latter. It shapes what you do and what you can make. (O'Bryan et al.)

However, the choice of *Star Wars* as a fictional referent also "shapes" *Star Wars Galaxies* ontologically, and does far more than encourage compliance with an event timeline from the movies. The parent network of *Star Wars* suggests a chronotope and a number of generic associations that influence the game and the expectations that players bring to it. Specifically, the invocation of *Star Wars* makes *Star Wars Galaxies* a story of a hero's quest, with a detailed template – Joseph Campbell's "monomyth." George Lucas himself has, famously and publicly, cited Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* as a strong influence on his initial work with the *Star Wars* universe. But Campbell's monomyth, though proposed as a general pattern that myths across cultures share, has some very specific characteristics and details:

> … whether presented in the vast, almost oceanic images of the Orient, in the vigorous narratives of the Greeks, or in the majestic legends of the Bible, the adventure of the hero normally follows the pattern of the nuclear unit above described: a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return. (Campbell 35)

The story of *Star Wars*, as part of Campbell's monomyth, draws on distinct story figures: the hero in exile, the individual journey. It identifies someone distinct, someone with a unique and transformative potential for society. The persistent world game as a form is built upon a very different dynamic: *Star Wars Galaxies* is, in important ways, fundamentally prosaic and social, full of rule-systems that encourage enculturation, embedded progress, cumulative rather than transformative changes of state[36]. Whether she groups with other players to kill a monster she cannot defeat alone, turns to a player mentor for goods and advice, or exchanges wares with another player, the persistent world gamer makes meaning from communal gameplay, or else loses interest with the game. As a modern, science-fantasy shaman – immensely powerful and key to the community, but also in a state of separation from it – the Jedi Knight is pivotal to *Star Wars* and fundamentally problematic to *Star Wars Galaxies*, particularly given that another aspect of the hero's quest – the final triumph and victory – cannot be achieved in a system where the Galactic Civil War must and will continue for the indefinite future.

However, this analysis will certainly not dissuade the hundreds if not thousands of aspiring Jedi Knights playing *Galaxies*, who have opportunities to vocalize and actualize their wishes in ways more direct than any comic book fan ever hoped to enjoy. These players have presented pointed critiques in response to the appeals to "continuity" made by the development team of *Star Wars Galaxies*, and in many ways seem to intuit the

[36] In a recent article on *EverQuest*, Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp make a similar point in terms of "game balance" and social equality: "The disjunction between the game's combination of a character system based on idealized equality and the high fantasy setting of the game's imagined world produces a deep and revealing irony" (Hayot and Wesp).

fundamental divergences of the persistent world game as a form from *Star Wars* as a branded entertainment property – divergences the producers of the game have not, or, perhaps, cannot fully or publicly acknowledge – while at the same time understanding the appeal of continuity as a practice and, with some community ambivalence, expressing impulses to preserve it. On the *Star Wars Galaxies* message boards, a part of Sony Online's Web presence, one of the most trafficked is the Jedi Knight discussion board, where players can post and discuss issues about the profession with one another in a forum visible to the development team – and, more recently, to a Jedi "correspondent" designated as a liaison between the player community and the developer team. On this board, questions of the Jedi rule system abound: most involve how to succeed within it, how to master the algorithm of professionalization and discovery that is partially but not fully documented. Several key threads, though, tackle "continuity" head on in response to the producer's assertion that Jedi must remain rare. A common question, given that the movies advertise Luke Skywalker as the "only hope" for the Rebellion, is exactly how many Jedi there could plausibly be. Readers phrase this often in terms of balance in the game economy and global concerns, such as one player who states that numbers in the thousands would definitely "break continuity," that "if Jedi still numbered in the thousands, they could hardly be said to be nearly extinct or wiped out- don't you agree?" (Would Not Break Continuity to Have 10,000 Jedi).

These literal explorations of continuity in terms of game balance, however, must face responses detailing the fundamental problems with continuity as an exercise in the context of *Star Wars Galaxies*: one particular message board post notes, "You can't be hardcore about the continuity in a game. It just doesn't work," and lists the inconsistencies of navigation, mortality, and combat that are presented in the game simply to make the game playable (New Holocrons = Breaking the Continuity Camel's

Back? Discuss.). A desire to be true to gameplay coexists with a desire to be true to the mythos of *Star Wars*, and there is a diversity of opinion regarding which is more important. However, many critiques assert that the existing rule system for Jedi presents problems for both gameplay and the mythos. A poster who states that "the madness that has ensued for Holocrons is anything but jedi-like [sic] behavior" laments that the rule system for gaining Jedi power encourages selfishness and social disruption, and, by implication supports neither the spirit of the *Star Wars* film saga nor the social growth of the game (Continuity? Bah! That's Funny!). This post raises some key points: though the Jedi rule system keeps the number of active Jedi Knights low, it also promotes an active agonism that drives players to hunt for the path to becoming a Jedi at the cost of other, more communal pursuits. This control has social consequences within the game that were, most likely, unanticipated. Perhaps more compelling here, however, is the idea that the rule system here is, itself, not "Jedi-like"; that, despite its consequent, continuity-reifying result – the scarcity of Jedi – the system works against its goals of continuity by making the path of the Jedi a selfish, anti-social, and somewhat random one, with little to it that evokes the Jedi ethic portrayed in the mythos.

Another post likewise operates on the assumption that "continuity" must account for more than literal adherence to the literality of a core narrative, and on appeals from a series of beliefs concerning what "living the movies" should be. This post opens by indicting the development team's appeals to continuity as a literal code of facts about the fictional world: the writer replies that, on the contrary, "continuity" consists of more figurative things, a "Star Wars feel" that involves a heightened spirit of heroism and agonistic struggle ("rogue dark jedi's [sic] running around killing [people] for no reason and then the light jedi's [sic] stepping in to protect the peaceful…") and allows the user to take on the path of a hero as an immersive experience (Continuity?????). Interestingly,

this writer frames the argument outside of Rausch's power-player/role-player dichotomy, and argues that the desire to be a Jedi is, in some ways, the pinnacle of the role-playing impulse: a desire to escape into the game as one escapes into the story of Luke Skywalker. The conflict here, then, exceeds the categories of "power gamer" and "role player" in significant ways, and is perhaps better mapped to two different categories: the social and prosaic network that connects the thousands of players from which the game emerges as an experience; and the profoundly individual stories of heroism from which the game takes its name and milieu. In this context, "everybody wants to be a Jedi" seems less like a problem to be solved and more like the operative dynamic from which the game emerges.

Once again, this is a young game, and the rules that govern the Jedi Knights are very much in flux – recently, the development team has begun rolling out changes that will make the path to Jedi more quest-based – but it seems doubtful that the algorithms for generating and maintaining Jedi in the game will ever be revised to a point of consensus, as they point to the fundamental tensions that govern the system, the unstable dialectic that makes this licensed and branded fiction system what it is. *Star Wars Galaxies* and persistent world games attempt to bring both popular stories and ideas of play into a real-time, persistent system that encompasses and exceeds them both, and must not only manage the tensions of a complex space of fiction production in a market, but also the tensions between telling stories and playing games as spheres of activity, and, finally, an insistent deferral of closure that pressures the world both as story and game, and forces adaptations and compromises regarding both aspects. If the history of the comics universe is any indication – and, of course, I believe that it is – these tensions will maintain their presence in persistent world games as forms, and will provoke new and ever-changing deformations and management practices in them.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Complications

This work has attempted to describe the textual consequences of corporate ownership and persistence; its goal is to present the distinct aspects of large-scale, corporate-owned fictions that have been shaped, or deformed (depending on one's perspective) by a determined open-endedness, expansion, and coordinated intertextual connection. Within this general framework, I have tried to make clear distinctions among the formal structures at play, particularly narrative forms (e.g., comics universes) and ergodic forms (e.g., persistent world games), while at the same time suggesting that the context of fiction networking implies, in both forms, a degree of interventionary response and recombination by all parties involved in the network's evolution: producer, consumer, and the continuum of roles in between.

A fiction network is a space where the unfolding fiction and the ongoing process of fiction-making must both be negotiated. This simultaneity – this represented coexistence of multiple levels of experience, with multiple distinct truth-values – must itself coexist with peculiarities of and among textual forms, and sometimes manifests itself in explicit discontinuities, moments where the fiction is disrupted by the inevitable gaps inherent in intertextual fiction-making. In the face of this inevitability, continuity becomes a practice of the community, an ongoing process of constructive retrospection that decides how a corpus of work represents a coherent fictional world; these decisions inform the continuing process of expanding, defining, and revising the persistent fiction. Because the core characteristics of a popular fiction network – a static, marketable brand and a constant and dynamic aggregation of information – are fundamentally irreconcilable, this practice of continuity is always contingent, always imperfect, always subject to further management and development.

These arguments, like any, rest on a significant set of axioms. While most of them are hopefully either delineated in the work already or plausible enough to accept without further exploration, there are a few that, I believe, merit further discussion. The first is my use of *corporate*, *the corporation*, or *producer* as an active agent in the creation, maintenance and expansion of fiction networks. I posit in my introduction that a fiction network is informed, and distinguished from folklore, by the presence of a system of proprietorship, and that a corporation or corporations hold the advantage of control over the fiction network by virtue of their ownership of it as intellectual property. In addition, corporate bodies bring to the fiction network not only rights of ownership but also resources and capital; this factor may not be definitive, but it is vastly influential. Corporations have the human and financial resources – and the access to an infrastructure for distribution – that allows the broad dispersal of a fiction across the mediasphere.

OPEN SOURCE FICTION NETWORKS

> You can't compete with a monopoly by playing the game by the monopolist's rules. The monopoly has the resources, the distribution channels, the R&D resources; in short, they just have too many strengths. You compete with a monopoly by changing the rules of the game into a set that favors your strengths. (Young 118)

However, there are other, non-proprietary models that enable the congregation of resources around the development, expansion and refinement of information. Open Source software models, which produce "software that is freely redistributable and can readily evolve and be modified to fit changing needs" (Raymond 67), likewise marshal a broad base of resources in the service of developing, maintaining, and governing the evolution of intellectual property. These models do so with the help of formal infrastructures that make their output comprehensible and valid within the legal and

economic discourses of global capitalism. Where folklore is creative output outside of the explicit context of capitalism, or possibly as a negation of the drives of capitalism, Open Source software and its creative variants (most, notably, the Creative Commons at http://www.creativecommons.org/) situate non-corporate creative endeavors within our present system, which presents considerable pressures to understand creative endeavors proprietarily – in short, a system that generates *Eldred vs. Ashcroft*, and fiction networks. Where Will Brooker presents a dream of a proprietary fiction released to the people, it is possibly more practical to envision the creation of a non-proprietary fiction network that recognizes the parameters and obstacles of our current climate with regards to intellectual property, and prospers within that climate using available models, with non-proprietary creative output circumscribed and enabled by formalized principles of open use and reproduction.

In the interest of full disclosure, I must admit that others have had this idea before I have:

> The character of Jenny Everywhere is available for use by anyone, with only one condition. This paragraph must be included in any publication involving Jenny Everywhere, in order that others may use this property as they wish. All rights reversed. (Jenny Everywhere - Faqs)

Jenny Everywhere, a.k.a. "The Shifter," was conceived by participants in the Barbelith Underground (a comics and culture message board spun off from a Web site devoted to Grant Morrison's series *The Invisibles*) in 2001 and 2002, in an effort to generate a proof of concept for Open Source comics:

> This is the Shifter. She has dimensional powers. To her associates, this means she can traverse say 4 or 5 dimensions, whatever that [sic] means. The truth is, she can access all dimensions. Again, not sure exactly what that means (and now you can see why it was abandoned). The part I really liked about her was that she inhabited all dimensions at the same time. Or, to be more accurate, parallel universes. And yes, I was thinking Crisis on Infinite Earths. Basically, she's

> having an infinite number of adventures on an infinite number of planets. Our story involved her staying on one Earth, but that needn't be the case in this exercise. ("Moriarty", Open Source Comic Book Characters)

"The Shifter" later picked up "Jenny Everywhere" as her "real" name, and gained a basic set of visual elements:

> With The Shifter (aka Jenny Everywhere) or any other characters we start with, it should be agreed that there are certain signifiers that would identify the character, like a costume. Example, in the sketches for the Shifter you will notice she has short hair, goggles on top of her head, and a scarf. If you have the goggles and/or the scarf on the character, there would be a good chance that no matter what style of drawing you use, or what other clothing you put on the character you decide upon, she will still be recognizable. ("Moriarty", Collective Comics Project.)

Immediately, Jenny Everywhere exhibits characteristics recognizable within a framework of informed fiction networking; she is a name and a set of visual narremes – a brand, or a meme – that can be redeployed and resituated without limit or boundary. Like the heroes of the DC Universe (*Crisis* is explicitly cited as an influence), Jenny as a character can mobilize modes of the fantastic to replicate, diversify, and expand; her "superpower" is a facility for intertextuality and memetic drift. Jenny Everywhere is designed to expand, replicate and network as an object-code. Her design speaks to the potential of the technologies and philosophies of Open Source – public licensing, coupled with sophisticated tools of communication, textual production, and distribution – to create a successful fiction network wholly outside the bounds of a private media corporation.

This potential, while recognizable as an extension of existing Open Source concepts, also complicates them in interesting ways. In his essay "Giving it Away" from the O'Reilly anthology *Open Sources*, Robert Young, CEO of Red Hat, Inc, describes his company's licensing and distribution of the Linux operating system. Linux is, famously, an Open Source technology; it is an operating system, a Unix clone whose code is freely distributable. Companies who sell and distribute Linux do so with this understood; rather

than invest in the proprietary value of the code itself, these companies attempt to provide additional value (convenience, support), and profit by selling Linux as a commodity that they have branded:

> We looked at the commodity industries and began to recognize some ideas. All leading companies selling commodity products, including bottled water (Perrier or Evian), the soap business (Tide), or the tomato paste business (Heinz), base their marketing strategies on building strong brands. These brands must stand for quality, consistency and reliability. We saw something in the brand management of these commodity products that we thought we could emulate. (Young 116)

Red Hat does not own Linux, but they do a very good business branding it, selling it in their individual distribution. Red Hat owns supplemental applications which they bundle with their distribution of Linux, and they profit from service contracts for the distributions they sell, but, perhaps most importantly, they own "Red Hat" as a growing brand, an affective code of visual and verbal signifiers and associations that give their products an advantage in a commodity market. In the case of a fiction network, however, the artifact has a far more imbricated and complicated relationship with the brand; instead of a fairly arbitrary relationship between commodity and brand, there is a dual system of meaning, with object-code and literary meaning conjoined in a reciprocal if complex relationship.

Beyond Open Source are models of virtual commerce that acknowledge the community's role in the success and continuation of a fiction network, and allow players or readers a degree of ownership in their creative output. In late 2003, Linden Lab, creators of the persistent world *Second Life*, revised the world's Terms of Service to allow in-game creators of content intellectual property rights to that content:

> "Until now, any content created by users for persistent state worlds, such as EverQuest® or Star Wars Galaxies™, has essentially become the property of the company developing and hosting the world," said Rosedale. "We believe our new policy recognizes the fact that persistent world users are making significant contributions to building these worlds and should be able to both own the content

> they create and share in the value that is created. The preservation of users' property rights is a necessary step toward the emergence of genuinely real online worlds." (Second Life Residents to Own Digital Creations).

In the agreement, Linden Lab retains the right to use such content for marketing purposes; player creations in *Second Life* can be used to promote and popularize *Second Life*. At the same time, Linden Lab recognizes the commons as the force that drives the growth of its game, and is taking pioneering steps to recognize the value of the commons.

The value of community production in the growth of persistent world games should not be underestimated or only understood as conventional "play." As I mentioned in the last chapter, in a persistent world the technologies of expanded fictional production and enabled consumer response converge, and the hierarchies between authorized and apocryphal content are strongly disrupted, as players are invited to become participants in the ongoing unfolding of the fiction. In *Star Wars Galaxies*, I as Kyyaraoao have built a home in the Rebel "player city" of Kashyyykur. This city is a community created, expanded, and maintained entirely by players; though the parameters of creation have been designated for player cities by the developers, the work of creation belongs outside of the developers' hands. Players made Kashyyykur. However, and perhaps logically, players do not *own* Kashyyykur; it is as much "work-for-hire" as Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's *New X-Men*, creative output owned by and benefiting a company whose goals are the expansion of its own fiction and brand. In the case of *Star Wars Galaxies*, however, the correspondence between consumer and producer is so immediate that "work for hire" as a concept can impede customer satisfaction, consequent customer output, and the game's eventual success. Again, *Second Life* and *Star Wars Galaxies* are two very different worlds: the first markets its own community freedom as an intrinsic value, the second brings significant brand equity to the bazaar of the persistent world as a somewhat risky gambit. However, both face the new and amplified ways these specific fiction

networks enable – and validate – consumer response, recreation, and production, and neither have yet finished negotiating the consequences of these changes.

THE AESTHETICS OF THE BAZAAR

They, and other networks, must also negotiate the effect such expansion, persistence and connection have on the fiction network as an aesthetic experience. To reinvoke a previous quote from Aarseth, who expressed concern that cybertexts would "be measured by an old, unmodified aesthetics" (Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature 23), these networks operate differently from conventional forms of literature, and their distinct modes of constructing experience seem to call for modifications in one's aesthetic approach to them. Indeed, by a conventional aesthetics, the fiction network as a structure provides a negative image; if one ties aesthetics to structure or composition, then the network is something of an anti-aesthetic category. Aristotle's *Poetics*, while ancient and only the beginning of centuries of debate on aesthetics, can begin the discussion here:

> Again, a beautiful object, whether it be a living organism or any whole composed of parts, must not only have an orderly arrangement of parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude; for beauty depends on magnitude and order. Hence a very small animal organism cannot be beautiful; for the view of it is confused, the object being seen in an almost imperceptible moment of time. Nor, again, can one of vast size be beautiful; for as the eye cannot take it all in at once, the unity and sense of the whole is lost for the spectator; as for instance if there were one a thousand miles long. As, therefore, in the case of animate bodies and organisms a certain magnitude is necessary, and a magnitude which may be easily embraced in one view; so in the plot, a certain length is necessary, and a length which can be easily embraced by the memory. (Aristotle)

Aristotle's declarations on unity and beauty have had to face the compromises of age: his prioritizing of memory assumes speech or performance as the primary modes of discourse, but writing (as Pavel notes) supplements memory and changes our

understandings of the literary. The novel, in turn, makes meaning by defying rules or generic expectations or schemas of beauty; it is an "anti-genre" in Bakhtin's framework, though even it retains some basic unities of beginning and closure. Electronic text, as presented by Lanham, cannot guarantee even this:

> The Aristotelian categories of beginning, middle, and end, it turns out, are based on fixed texts. Think of all the arguments about coherence and perfection of artistic form that depend on these Aristotelian coordinates. Again, such arguments have been made a general ideal of written expression. All our arguments build toward a conclusion. (Lanham 125)

Lanham locates a disruption of these internalized categories in new technologies, and his assertion has some truth to it. But these categories can also be disrupted by market pressures applied to codex technologies; the DC Comics universe as understood materially, as the sum of six decades of periodical output, has been inflated by persistent seriality to a magnitude far beyond what Aristotle might consider vast, and now exceeds not only human capacities for memory but human capacities for access and, arguably, mortal human capacities for processing. A persistent world game as the convergence of fiction networking and immersive cybernetic textuality amplifies these issues of complexity exponentially. Is it possible to look at such a structure through the lens of conventional aesthetics, or is the very idea ludicrous?

These questions have a particular relevance for me as I look at *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, which fares poorly under most aesthetic frameworks I can bring forth, including that of "good comics" or "graphic storytelling." *Crisis* is unquestionably melodramatic, and off-puttingly dense. Its characters are fairly flat, their motivations unsubtle and histrionic. Yet, I remain convinced that it is, in its own way, as important a text in the history of mainstream comics as its contemporaries, *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, both of which are unquestionably more aesthetically valued. What's more, despite my assertions of its aesthetic inadequacies, I find *Crisis on Infinite Earths*

compelling and irreplaceable as an artifact, and I take pleasure in reading it. If I can recognize it as inferior in light of conventional aesthetics, then should my sense of affect be simply written off as nostalgia, or dismissed as a reaction to spectacle? It's certainly possible that this is the case, and I have little doubt that my arguments can be read as, to repurpose a monologue from Morrison in *Animal Man*, my own version of "trotting out the Nietzsche and the Shelley and the Shakespeare to dignify some old costumed claptrap" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Origin of the Species 131). Spectacle, as a foundational register of cinema, is certainly a component within multiple-media universes as popular entertainment, and both comics and computer games remediate the spectacular aspects of cinema in multiple ways, from the recent trend in mainstream American comics toward "widescreen storytelling" to the "cut-scenes" that act as elements of embedded narrative within computer games. And yet, *Crisis* compels me more – and differently – than many other comics of that same period, or many, more "spectacular" comics and games published today. The third chapter of this work was an attempt to explain why, in terms of the DC Universe as a history. *Crisis* is compelling because it portrays a radical transformation in a diegetic and material history; in a system continually in struggle between stasis and dynamic action, it is a site of real change, and is arguably a document of phase transition, a text in which the DC Universe as a system manifests and achieves a new level of complexity.

Mastering this complexity is a pleasure in itself: there is pleasure in experiencing the informational density of *Crisis,* saturated with worlds, characters, and events, and understanding it. To return to Gee, who mentions comics in passing during his discussion of video games:

> So there are different ways to read different types of texts. Literacy is multiple, then, in the sense that the legal literacy needed for reading law books is not the same as the literacy needed for reading physics texts or superhero comic books.

> And we should not be too quick to dismiss the latter form of literacy. Many a superhero comic is replete with post-Freudian irony of a sort that would make a modern literary critic's heart beat fast and confuse any otherwise normal adult. Literacy, then, even as traditionally conceived to involve only print, is not only a unitary thing but a multiple matter. (Gee 14)

Superhero comic books as I am reading them here might be better described as replete with intertextual and metatextual play, but the principle is apt: there is a particular literacy required to comprehend what is going on in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, or, indeed, what is going on in *Animal Man* or *Flex Mentallo*. Literacy in a system of the DC Universe's complexity is a non-trivial superset of other literacies – verbal, visual, or even comics-specific. It involves an understanding of the system's history, variety, and specific rules of engagement, and as a literacy it is markedly different from a literacy in the *Star Wars* "Expanded Universe," or in *EverQuest*, partially because the multiple-media universe as a form differs from comics universes or persistent world games as systems of representation or simulation, but also because *every fiction network is a unique genre*, with its own formulae and set of consumer expectations, and, though I have tried to identify common behaviors and understand the forces that create these networks, the only prediction I can make about any fiction network is that its evolution will be unpredictable. This is the very principle of emergence, and this complexity and unpredictability makes a literacy in a given network rewarding. Learning to "read" the DC Universe is an evolving process of mastery over a distinct semiotic domain; though its colorful, marketed façade is easy to apprehend and understand, its details and inner workings are not. This complexity of the system is understood, often, as a problem, a counterforce to the stability of a brand and an impediment to marketing, but long-term readers of the universe continue to read it specifically because of this complexity; a

reader's engagement with the system over time is rewarded in an ever-growing literacy, and the informationally-saturated *Crisis* is a grand reward.

Crisis on Infinite Earths provoked a great deal of critical thinking about the DC Universe, and the artifacts that respond to *Crisis* critically – *Animal Man*, *Flex Mentallo* and others – are, unquestionably, aesthetically superior artifacts that provoke the reader and encourage critique of the universe; I have no hesitation in calling them literary. But *Crisis* is a quandary; though the work lacks self-reflection about its complexity, there is aesthetic power in that complexity itself. The cover image to the collected edition *Crisis* is packed with representations of the characters and the activity of the series. Figures are represented in all corners of the page, and at several levels of foreground and background. The image contains, officially, 562 characters. In its scale, it contains a power all its own, and a far greater power when its saturated composition is, by virtue of a literacy in the system, fully legible. This genre of composition – the cover image that displays a cast of hundreds, and saturates the field of representation with iconicity and activity – is a staple in superhero comic books, a convention known to draw a reader in with the pleasures offered by complexity and recognition. This pleasure in literacy, in looking upon a representation of excessive scale and understanding it, is key to a participant's ongoing engagement with the DC Universe; in addition, texts like *Animal Man* require that literacy, that understanding of the DC Universe's arcane and mechanics, to function as literary works.

Achieving this literacy in a comics universe is a challenging and time-consuming process. In addition, since one can get enjoyment from a multiple-media universe without such engagement – one doesn't have to understand *Crisis* to enjoy the television series *Smallville* – deep engagement and literacy in the comics universe is often considered unnecessary, and more than a little strange. Literacy in a popular fiction

network is often considered abject, more worthy of bemusement or derision than close critical attention. Particularly for this reason, I believe it is necessary to acknowledge the role of literacy in these systems, and to attempt to situate it, in order to talk cogently about reconciling fiction networks with the expectations of conventional popular aesthetics.

BUILDING A BETTER FICTION NETWORK

This reconciliation is not merely a matter of abstract speculation; fiction networks, on the whole, are faced with crises of aesthetics, for a number of predictable reasons. There are recurring general complaints about persistent world games: they are often accused of tedium, or of being too difficult. Likewise, multiple-media networks, whose drive to persistence forces recurring denials of an ending, can conflict with consumer expectation. *The Matrix Revolutions*, for instance, ends with an ambiguity and a deferral of closure. This provides a useful bridge to upcoming artifacts, particularly the persistent world game *The Matrix Online*, but at the same time this ambiguity is cited by many viewers as making the movie profoundly unsatisfying. Beyond persistence, the inherent complexity of some networks is not only off-putting but generative of an esoteric community; consequently, these networks are often considered impenetrable by outsiders. The practices of comics universes are considered the domain of a "cult" following, and often considered an impediment to success. All these phenomena speak to the challenges these networks face in terms of consumer desires and of conventional aesthetics.

While these challenges of legibility pose aesthetic questions in comics universes and multiple-media universes, they imply much more in a persistent world game, which requires a given level of situated literacy not only to enjoy the form, but to operate within

it; orientation and literacy are a prerequisite to successful "ergodic discourse" within the space of the persistent world. This increased importance of literacy in persistent world games merits, I believe, further analysis of its distinctions and its possible pleasures[37]. This critical study of fiction networks is intended specifically as a first step toward the understanding of the creation and maintenance of fiction networks. The general response to persistent branded universes, when they become uninteresting, or cease to make a profit, is that they are simply inherently misshapen, or exhausted; there has not yet been an effort to consider the behaviors and characteristics of fiction networks in critical terms. A critical perspective, I believe, can inform conscious management of these forms, and can possibly improve or facilitate their development through the posing of questions regarding practice: How can a fiction remain coherent and rewarding under the pressures of persistence, expansion, community participation, and interdependence? What techniques can be used to make the complexity of such a fiction legible and compelling to new entrants? What is the role of "management" in this process? How can branding and consistency be reconciled with emergence and divergence?

These are the questions that critical study of these fiction networks can address; in addition, as these questions suggest, ongoing study of persistent world games, comics universes and multiple-media universes can, potentially, generate not only hermeneutic but pragmatic frameworks. These networks are persistent systems with endemic contradictions and tensions, tensions which, I believe, elude easy resolution and instead call for ongoing and recurrent management. Some of these tensions can, possibly, be mitigated by skillful design, by an informed structuring of the system at inception, but most of the behaviors unearthed by the readings in this work are best classified as

[37] Such analysis is already being done, informally, in video game journalism, in articles like "Tough Love: Can a Video Game be too Hard?" (Thompson)

emergent: traceable, in retrospect, to parameters inherent in the system's design or evolution, but not anticipated at inception. Given the range of variables presented here – tensions of multiple levels of meaning, the unpredictability of persistence, the multiplicity of informative presences in the system – it seems more pragmatic to discuss fiction networks not in terms of ideal designs that escape emergent issues, but in terms of management practices that deal with the realities and issues of fiction networks as they emerge.

Such practices are, predictably, already developing. In persistent world games, for example, "community manager" has emerged as a role; these player-developer liaisons respond to the communications and opinions generated by the online community and act as mediators or advocates for both producers and consumers. The community manager's challenging role is that of intermediary among the various subcommunities and vested interests that operate upon the persistent world game as an unfolding world of gaming and meta-gaming. The community manager, then, can benefit from understanding what conflicts are likely to arise from the progress of the persistent world game as a fiction; what role is played by imaginary engagement, by prior generic expectations, and by a community's construction and application of "continuity" as an optic on the game. In later work, I hope and intend to present my theoretical conclusions in terms of discipline-specific practices that persistent world game community managers, designers, and other interested parties can evaluate and, hopefully, implement.

METHODS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

While I have structured my analysis here in terms of critical readings, observations and historical arguments, I believe there are other methods that would suit

themselves well to the study of fiction networks, particularly persistent world games, where, as I have mentioned earlier, the scale, the ephemerality of the form in play, and the participatory component required of the space limit any one observer's ability to apprehend the whole. While I have tried to construct a more representative understanding through supplemental research into "second-level" artifacts, or materials generated to describe the space, as well as first-person gameplay, I believe the approaches of researchers in other disciplines, particularly the social sciences, can further supplement this analysis. Nicholas Yee's Daedalus Project is an online archive that applies survey protocols and sociological methods to the study of persistent world game player psychology; though his concerns are largely with player behavior, surveys like "Appeal of Genres and Implementations," which measured audience response to common persistent world game operations situated within different story genres (Yee), hint at the possibilities for surveys, case studies, and similar methods that collect data from a player or reader regarding their expectations, assumptions, and responses to a given network. Given that my own study has reinforced the concept of the game player as a generator of textual output from a system via ergodic operation, it seems a logical next step to suggest some approaches from the social sciences as possibly germane to further work with persistent world games as a form. Case study approaches to games in progress allow the collection of data from multiple perspectives regarding the experience of gameplay, allowing the researcher the benefit of multiple sets of textual information generated from the "textual machine," and replaces the possible idiosyncrasy of the researcher's gameplay with a range of experiences from which to triangulate.

IN CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have tried to make claims of affinity for a number of mass media forms that may not appear very related at first glance. As I have discussed, the forms in question operate as or within fiction networks in different ways; in addition, the existing scholarship on these forms have tended to take on different foci. Video game theory, as a branch of new media theory that descends from analyses of hypertext and "cybertext," has had, to again invoke Aarseth, a largely "textonomic" focus. Its preeminent concerns have involved what defines the texts (or textual machines) in question: what distinguishes them from other texts (or, what distinguishes them from texts altogether), and what paradigms and principles inform their composition. In distinction, comics criticism, with some very notable exceptions (particularly Scott McCloud) has placed much focus on reception and process, on the systems by which comics are created and understood by communities, and on the dialogues in which comics inform and are informed by other art forms. Textonomic video game theories have been able to use the approach as a means of establishing "video games" as a form that is unique and important; they have emphasized textual types rather than subject matter or context in order to illuminate what makes video games like, or unlike, other textual types – novels, dramas, films, comics – and to use that similarity, or dissimilarity, as an argument for the merit of video games, and for the merit of the theories themselves. Less seems at stake in the study of comics; scholars focus on comics in the context of other (social, economic, inter-formal) systems, perhaps because comics are, to some extent, considered a lost cause. Comics have been cited by games scholars as a

cautionary example that should spur on their work; if we do not work hard and do the right things, the claim suggests, then we will be left with a "ghetto" form, like comics[38].

Of course, I hope that I've taken a step toward complicating that caveat; I would call those "ghettoes" affinity groups, and, without unrealistically valorizing the troubled market practices of North American comics, I believe that the future of the other major form in question in this work, persistent world games, can be helped immensely by understanding the process of persistent textual engagement in and affinity with comics universes, a process contained within this concept of "ghettoization." Beyond that, however, I hope that this work suggests spaces where these various positions and perspectives can meet. Bakhtin's idea of genre as a "form-shaping ideology" attempts to marry the context that informs and the form itself; it suggests that the two states are not only intimate but inseparable. "Fiction network" as an approach has been my attempt to look at two specific subcategories, both of which are underrepresented or presented as anomalous by the scholarship in their respective fields – the comics universe, and the persistent world online game – and to show that as forms they both require new approaches and suggest new correspondences, that they may best be described in a union of textonomic and contextual approaches. In addition, "fiction network" attempts to highlight the issue that problematizes so many of these texts in a way that existing textonomies have not wrestled with: the artifacts within a given branded fiction property are not presented by their producers with the description "this is a genre," but rather "this is a text," and are therefore received with an understood, even if compositionally unsupported, textual unity that academic arguments of textonomic distinction or

[38] For example: "But unless more organisations follow the lead of the Museum of Scotland - which funded the initial research behind Game On, by guest curator Lucien King - there is a risk that the appreciation of games could be confined to a ghetto, like comic books" (Schofield); and, "Games, for Jenkins, are at a similar threshold point, destined either to remain in a ghetto location (the fate of comics, for example) or to develop into a more mature form" (King and Krzywinska 21).

correspondence have not yet accounted for. Our understandings of ludological principles of text-generating machinery, or our concepts of juxtapositions of text and image in deliberate sequence, must find additional methods to address the fact that, in the market and, to some degree, in the minds of the reception community, all of it is *Star Wars*. If we can reconcile this conflict – the distinctions of form, in struggle with the totalizations of corporate intertext – then we have taken a significant step toward understanding what a better, truer game, film, or comic book serial can look like in a world where they are all chapters of the same story, forever and ever, world without end.

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Vita

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He has taught for the Department of English and the Division of Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Texas at Austin, and has also taught at Nagaoka High School, Nagaoka, Japan. He is also a software engineer, with experience in software development for ExploreLearning, Cirrus Logic, and ActiveInk Corporation.

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This dissertation was typed by the author.